The Ambassadorial Series: Deans of U.S.-Russia Diplomacy

Transcripts of the Interviews

COMPILED AND EDITED BY THE MONTEREY INITIATIVE IN RUSSIAN STUDIES
MIDDLEBURY INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
JANUARY 24, 2022

Washington, D.C., January 25, 2022 – The National Security Archive updates today the publication last year of interview transcripts from eight former U.S. ambassadors to Russia, providing essential historical context to debates over U.S.-Russian relations, with three additional interviews with the deans of American diplomacy with Moscow – Jack Matlock, Thomas Pickering, and James Collins.

The interviews are courtesy of the Middlebury Institute for International Studies at Monterey, where the Graduate Initiative in Russian Studies, under the direction of Professor Anna Vassilieva, has organized the entire Ambassadorial series of interviews and is publishing the material in videos, podcasts, and transcripts.

The three new interviews cover the 1990s in Russia and the rise of Vladimir Putin through the expert eyes of Jack Matlock, ambassador from 1987 to 1991, Thomas Pickering, ambassador from 1993 to 1996, and James Collins, ambassador from 1997 to 2001. The interviews were conducted in 2021 by the Middlebury Institute's expert Dr. Hannah Notte, based in Vienna.

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Ambassador Jack F. Matlock

Dates of Service as U.S. Ambassador in Moscow: 1987-1991

PART 1

Hanna Notte
Ambassador Jack Matlock, thank you so much for talking with us today in this sequel to the first Ambassadorial Series. It's a real honor for me to speak with you today, having read your books, and having heard you speak many times in the past on U.S.-Russian relations. After your distinguished career serving the U.S. government, including as ambassador in the Soviet Union and in Czechoslovakia, you actually wrote quite extensively about Soviet-U.S. and then Russian-U.S. relations as well, including in your books *Autopsy of an Empire*, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, and then also your latest book, *Superpower Illusions*, which have given me great inspiration for this conversation today. So, thank you again for doing this.

Ambassador Matlock
Well, thank you, and thank you for reading my books before asking your questions; it makes them much more pertinent.

Hanna Notte
Ambassador Matlock, let us start with history. In your books, you draw attention to three crucial events towards the late 1980s and early 1990s, which you believe have been frequently misconstrued in terms of their causes, their interrelation, and, in fact, who should take credit for them.

And those events are the end of the Cold War, the end of communism as a system of rule in the USSR, and the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. And, in fact, nowadays, it seems to me, indeed, that the term 'end of the Cold War' is used interchangeably with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

So, I'd like to ask you: what, in your view, gave rise to this intellectual laziness? Why does it matter? And which misreadings of history have been most consequential for the trajectory of the U.S.-Russia relationship since then?

Ambassador Matlock
You know, that's an excellent question and one that I ask myself at times. But I think that the reason so many people... There are several reasons so many people are confused, I think, and look at the breakup of the Soviet Union as the end of the Cold War. Now, the Cold War ended before that, and as I watched that process, but as I think about the perceptions, almost no one among the specialists predicted that the Soviet Union would break up.

Many doubted that Gorbachev's reforms were real, even as they became more and more clear that they were. And the events moved so rapidly, particularly between 1987 and 1991, that it was very hard, even for specialists, to keep up. And for the general population, all of these steps seem to have come as a surprise. But it seemed to me very clear that the rationale for the Cold War ended by December 1988, specifically when Gorbachev, in effect he gave up the Marxian class struggle theory as a basis of Soviet foreign policy. After that, it was just a matter of cooperating to clean up many of the results of the Cold War.

And then, because the Cold War was over and pressure on the Soviet Union, external pressure, decreased, it gave Gorbachev a chance to try to reform the Soviet system. That got out of hand when too many in the Communist Party began to resist him. And yet he had sufficient control of the party because of tradition, that despite everybody's expectation, he actually acted to take the party out of total control of the country, which he needed to do if it was to reform.

And as this was developing, nationalism in the various republics, including the Russian Federated Soviet Republic, began to increase. And also, the economy, in as much as they were trying to reform an economy which operated on almost the opposite basis of a market economy, that economy was failing to produce and distribute even basic consumer goods. So, they had an economic crisis for the average people, a rise in individual nationalism, and just as, you might say, the controls, the forced controls, were being taken off. So that, I see that the second of these great movements were actually motivated internally. And Gorbachev had, you might say, the maneuver room to try to reform because the Cold War was over, because those pressures were there.

If we had not ended the Cold War, I think we would still have the Soviet Union. It might be a failing state, but I think it would still be there, because as long as the Communist Party and its instruments of repression – the KGB, the military – stayed loyal, they were going to repress any change.

What happened here was, the leader of the Communist Party used his position to take that party out of control. Now that is something nobody expected in the West, and many people doubted, as it was happening, that it was genuine. But by 1991, these processes had reached such a stage that by the end of the year, of course, the Soviet Union itself collapsed.

Well, part of that was the effort by the very people who were supposed to secure the Soviet Union; the head of the KGB, the head of the military, and the prime minister conspired to try to stop the reforms and stop the creation of a voluntary federation. And that so weakened Gorbachev and the Union that it did fall apart in December. And I might say that as far as United States was concerned, we did not want that to happen. We did not consider it a victory.

But, you know, you can understand why people would. It happened fast, it happened unexpectedly, it happened for reasons many thought were impossible. But suddenly it was

clear the Cold War was over, and that the Soviet Union itself had not survived as a unitary state. And then, you know, the media immediately seized upon this as the end of the Cold War. I recall in the late 1990s previewing a documentary that was later shown on CNN and others, which shows the end of the Cold War with the Soviet flag coming down in the Kremlin and the Russian flag being raised. And I told the producer immediately, "That's not when the Cold War ended; it ended earlier." And he said, "Well, but that's not very dramatic." And I said, "Look, are you writing drama, or are you writing history?" Well, it was clear he was writing drama.

But he was also conforming to the usual perception, and it's an understandable perception. But, as you say, it is one that reflects a certain laziness in looking closely at the facts as they transpired.

Now, why has this been a problem? Well, by looking at the end of the Cold War as a complete victory for the West, some drew the totally unfounded conclusion that, well, this proves that the system we have in the West is the future of the world; it's suitable for everybody. Then Francis Fukuyama's famous book, The End of History – you know, it reminded me very much of just a variant of Marxism-Leninism. Actually, you know, Marx had predicted that there would be a proletarian revolution which would extinguish and eliminate the bourgeoisie and create socialism, sort of a utopia for everybody.
And this was really the fundamental of Stalinism – Leninism and Stalinism. It was really the basis of what we call the Brezhnev Doctrine.

When the Soviet Union, for example, declared the policy of it was their duty to support and expand what they called socialism everywhere, because that was the future. I recall once when Foreign Minister Gromyko came to Washington, and President Reagan asked him directly, he said, "Do you still believe in a one world socialist state?" And Gromyko said, "Well, of course." He said, "But if I believe in that, it's like believing that tomorrow the sun will rise in the east and set in the west. It's not something we have to help." But others said differently.

When Reagan, in his first visit with Gorbachev, complained about some of the military interventions in Africa and Latin America, Gorbachev ventured, "We're simply doing our international duty. And, you know, "Get used to it." This is the future. Well, he changed his mind on that, thank goodness. But my point is that by saying that, well, 'democracy' – and I have to put that in quotes because we never defined it precisely – is the future, and it is our duty to spread it.

Now, what's the problem with that? Well, first of all, there's no evidence that the same form of government is going to suit everybody in the world with such different histories, customs, social structures. In fact, the evidence, the pragmatic evidence, is to the contrary. But second, even if that's the case, there is no way an outsider can create for people a government of the people, by the people, for the people. Only a people can do that for themselves.

And if you really want to spread a given form of government, how do you do it? You show how it works at home. And I'll tell you, it's not working very well at home today, maybe precisely because we have presumed that we can – by using force, by using sanctions – that we can change other people's political systems. I don't think that's possible, though I know that the people who believe this believe it, and it is... But I think it creates more problems than it solves.

So, I think that by misunderstanding how the Cold War ended, and by treating, in particular, Russia as a defeated country, in effect, without any national interests, that we have helped create and exacerbate the problems we have today.

Hanna Notte
This was fascinating, Ambassador. So many important elements and moments here. I do want to come back to some of those later in the conversation, particularly the Brezhnev Doctrine and the notion of democracy promotion.

For the moment, I want to stick a little bit with the end of the Cold War and the early 1990s and ask you about the implications of the collapse of the Soviet Union for the Soviet people. I read *Autopsy of an Empire*, and you start that book with a fascinating anecdote. You recount the 25th of December 1991 – you mentioned it just now – the day that Gorbachev announced live on TV that essentially the Soviet Union was gone.

And you then used the example of Gorbachev's assistant, a young Soviet diplomat from Georgia, to point to the cognitive dissonance that millions of people must have experienced at the time. You write, "He no longer knew who he was. He was Georgian, and he was Soviet, and there had been no contradiction. What now?"

So, I want to ask you, considering the many implications of the USSR's collapse, on the level of identity, economic organization, governance, which ones were the most significant that Western observers, Western officials really needed to make an effort to understand at the time? And perhaps, which implications remain least understood even today?

Ambassador Matlock
Yes, well, there were so many factors operating then, and frankly, I don't think there's a way you can usefully quantify to say, well... Certainly, the economic collapse was extremely important everywhere. The rise of nationalist feeling, based upon one's native language primarily, was certainly quite perceptible in all, including in Russia.

But I would say that for different individuals, different things were more important. And extreme nationalists would sometimes simply use economic difficulties for their own ends. Others, for them the economic difficulties would be paramount. And so, different people had different priorities, had different push. I think Gorbachev thought, and actually many other people thought, that during the 70 years of Soviet rule, they had created, you might say, a new Soviet person, one sort of based more on ideology than on ethnicity. And it turned out that

was not the case. The ideology sort of crumbled under them. People had already... Most stopped believing in it, even while it was the official thing.

But, you know, this leaves people with a very difficult thing to face, and that is, "Who are we? Who are we? Are we Russians, or are we something broader and different?" Well, we're facing this in the United States today, so we should be able to understand. I mean, we too, some of our groups for a long time had been, at least implicitly, white supremacists. Now that's no longer working in the United States, and it is a traumatic experience for many of us defining, what is an American? Is a white American somehow superior or more authentic than a Black or Brown [American]?

And so, I think that we need to understand that there were many different pressures pushing. Probably the most prominent of these, in not only the national republics, but in the Russian republic itself, was a feeling of ethnic exclusivity. And we can see that since the breakup of the Soviet Union, in many of the republics, the dominant nationality has suppressed its minorities. In other words, it's unwilling to give its minorities the sort of equal rights that they have. I mean, Georgia was attacking South Ossetia even while the Soviet Union still existed, for example. And of course, we had the Armenian-Azerbaijani fighting even before the Soviet Union collapsed. And these things all got worse after it did.

So, there were so many forces going on at the same time that Gorbachev was having to deal with a totally different international situation. After all, he began to encourage reforms in Eastern Europe, and when these reforms led to a downfall of all the Communist governments, he accepted and even welcomed that. Now, that was something that, again, nobody had predicted in the past, though it was actually in the Soviet interest to do so, because nothing weakens a country more than trying to control people that don't want you to control them. That's something we don't understand today, in so many issues. I would say Ukraine is better off without Crimea, because most of the people in Crimea prefer to be in Russia, and yet...

Pardon me for jumping ahead so much, but the problem here is – the one I'm pointing to – is the idea that so many have, that well, we define our identity on the basis of ethnicity rather than a broader concept. And this is something that, quite frankly, I think most other countries are going through. But it was forced upon the people of the former Soviet Union very rapidly and in ways that some were hurt more than others.

And any time of rapid social change, this is going to be the case. There are going to be losers, there are going to be winners. And if they fight too much among them, everybody turns out to be a loser.

So, what was most important? I suppose it was really the combination of the rise of, I would say, ethnic nationalism, along with the deterioration in economic conditions for average people.

Hanna Notte
Thank you for that, Ambassador. I do want to come to a slightly different topic, which is that of arms control and nuclear weapons.

Ambassador Matlock
Yes.

Hanna Notte
Ronald Reagan dreamt of a world free of nuclear weapons, and as you note in your book, he was also deeply affected by the Chernobyl disaster of 1986. Yet, at the same time, he launched the Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI, in 1983. I would like to ask you two questions on this, if I may.

The first is really, why did Reagan do it? Why did he launch the SDI, and did no one in his administration realize, anticipate, perhaps even warn against the deep concerns that this effort might evoke on the Soviet side, regarding the deterrent value of their strategic offensive arsenal?

And the second question: if we fast forward a little bit, we then did have some progress on arms controls into the early 1990s with the START Treaties, with the Lisbon Protocol, with the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives. Why was that momentum lost with the Clinton administration?

Ambassador Matlock
Well, the first question is that the reason President Reagan became enamored of the Strategic Defense Initiative was his total hatred of nuclear weapons, and his total rejection of the theory that our policy was based on mutual assured destruction. He would say, "How can you tell me that the only way I can defend the American people is by killing millions of innocent people elsewhere? I cannot accept that."

And when he was told that there is a possibility of a defense that could defend against ballistic missiles that might be developed, then this, he thought, would make it possible to reduce and even eliminate nuclear weapons, because you had a defense against them. Otherwise, even if countries agreed to reduce them, who knows whether some, as he would say, some future Hitler doesn't arise and decide they're going to build them anyway? And if you don't have defenses, what can you do?

And as he said, we banned chemical weapons after World War I, but we kept our gas masks. So, in his mind, there was nothing inconsistent, and he really couldn't understand why others would think that this was an offensive strategy.

Now, what I think – actually, some Soviet scientists actually tended to dismiss it as not a threat, so that was not a universal view in the Soviet Union. Others said, "Look, it's impossible to have a completely effective defense." And that is actually true, because these defense

systems are very vulnerable; they depend upon satellite communications, and you take those satellite communications out, they don't work. As Sakharov said at one point, "The problem with strategic defenses is that it's easier to take things out of orbit than it is to put them there."

And so, the irony is that although Reagan's belief was sincere, and he felt this very deeply, technically it would not have worked to be a threat. So now, on the Soviet side, as I said, some actually advised, "Don't worry about it, it's not going to work in that way." Others said, "No, we have to do it, because if it does work, look, it will mean that our missiles will be useless, and they could attack us." Well, they could attack us and then defend themselves from... Well, that too was a...

Others said, "Look, this is just a cover for an offensive thing. What they want to do is put nuclear weapons in space," which was never a part of this program, and of course, it was prohibited by international agreements. But I think many in the Soviet Union, particularly in the Politburo, they were not very technically competent, and I was told later by senior Russian officials, "Well, our people really did think this was an offensive strategy." Reagan was convinced it wasn't. And so, we had this case.

Now, for some of Reagan's advisors, I mean like Bud McFarlane, our national security advisor for a while, for him it was a scam, because up until then, the Soviets had always insisted that any reductions be proportionate. But they had developed an ICBM, an intercontinental ballistic missile, which number one, was mobile, which means you can move it from one place to the other; number two, had ten warheads that were very accurate and could easily take out our land-based ICBMs, which were single warhead. So, it became part of the basis of our policy to try to get a great reduction or possible elimination of these ICBMs.

At one point Reagan actually proposed that we both eliminate all ICBMs so that we wouldn't have weapons, and then if we had defenses, that would be against other people. Gorbachev never accepted that, never even took it seriously. But the point is that we were worried about the theoretical possibility that their ICBMs, which we could not target in advance because they were mobile, that were sufficient to take out our land-based deterrent because they were all in silos, had a single warhead.

So then, the first plan was, okay, so we'll build a mobile ICBM. The one we planned had only three warheads, not ten, because the Soviets had greater lift capacity than we did. You know, Americans always seem to assume that, well, we have superior technology, and we'll keep that superiority. That of course has been disproved time and time and time again. But this is another example of it, because in our first arms control agreements, our military wanted to preserve the right to MIRV, that is to put multiple warheads, because we were ahead in that technology. Ten years later, the Soviets were ahead in that technology, and we wanted to reduce or ban them. This shows both sides were making miscalculations.

However, we found that it was going to be impossible for us to develop and deploy a mobile ICBM in the United States, because it had to be passed by Congress, and who in the world is going to vote to have ICBMs moved on our railways or our reinforced superhighways? Nobody. I mean, you don't want them in your back yard. So it was politically impossible for us to develop a counterpart.

And so McFarlane said, "Okay, we've got to fool them. We'll say we'll build a defense that negates yours, if we don't reduce them." So in that case, he looked at it as, in effect, a scam. And, at one point, before Reykjavík – and at Reykjavík – Reagan actually said, "Okay, let's both develop defenses and agree to eliminate our ballistic missiles. Not just intercontinental, but all ballistic missiles." And Gorbachev never considered that. He thought, how would we ever get agreement to do that?

Well, it would have taken Reagan overruling most of his military people to do it, but he was capable of that while he was in office.

In any event, I'm rambling on a lot, but just to point out that these issues were not all that simple, that motivations differed on both sides, that in fact in Reagan's mind, and in fact, the Strategic Defense Initiative was not a threat to the Soviet Union. One can understand, and if there's not any basic trust between them, there would be those who would doubt that and suspect that. But that's why he hung on so long.

And let me say frankly that if we had not had the problem of what they call the Iran-Contra controversy – just after the Reykjavík meeting, we were on the verge of accepting Gorbachev's proposal that he made at Reykjavík – and if we had not lost our senior officials who backed that in the Iran-Contra dispute, we very likely would have accepted Gorbachev's proposal to keep SDI in laboratories for ten years. That was my recommendation when I got back to Washington. It was accepted by the national security advisor, but he got caught up in the Iran-Contra, got dismissed, and it shows how domestic politics, other issues, often intrude.

So bottom line, SDI cannot work as it was envisioned by Reagan, but it was not a threat to others as he envisioned it.

Hanna Notte
In the early 1990s, so after Reagan, we have some progress also on arms control, START 1, START 2, the Lisbon Protocol, and the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives. But then this momentum gets lost during the Clinton administration. Why was that? Why was that momentum lost on arms control?

Ambassador Matlock
Well, that's a question for the people in the Clinton administration. It was a great disappointment, as far as I was concerned, that we didn't proceed. I recall strongly recommending that we come to an agreement with then the Russian Federation to eliminate all short-range nuclear missiles from Europe.

And I know the man, before he was defense secretary, but later he was Clinton's defense secretary, said, "Well, we can't do that. The west Europeans, our allies, would not agree to that." And I said, "Are you telling me that they're going to insist we keep weapons in Europe, that if they're used, are going to be used against them?" I mean, short-range nuclear weapons in Europe made no sense at all. But the Clinton administration was concentrating on other things.

And I must say the people, who earlier in the Democratic Party had been strong on disarmament, were not very prominent in the Clinton administration. There was too much feeling of triumphalism, we've got to show that we're number one, that the 20th century is the American century, and they were much more interested in, as most politicians are, in satisfying their domestic constituents.

So, as I said, I think it's too bad we didn't proceed with much more radical reductions. I think that would have been possible then if we had not been willing to do it on a fair basis. But we didn't, and then very soon we began to have the issues, such as the expansion of NATO, which probably made further reductions in nuclear weapons virtually impossible.

Hanna Notte
This is great, very clear, Ambassador. I want to stay with the early '90s for one other question and come to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 which provided one of the first tests of the developing U.S. and then still Soviet relationship under Gorbachev, especially if you consider that Saddam's Iraq had been a long-standing Soviet ally.

And, as you note in your book, Gorbachev passed the test; he went against some of his Middle East advisors and ensured that the Soviet ambassador at the United Nations supported the United States in condemning the invasion of Kuwait, and then also in supporting the legal basis for what became the first Gulf War.

So I want to ask you, Ambassador Matlock, how was Gorbachev convinced to go against his advisors? Who convinced him, and how was the first Gulf War then perceived among the Russian people at the time?

Ambassador Matlock
Well, first of all, Gorbachev didn't go against his principal advisor, Eduard Shevardnadze. It was Eduard Shevardnadze that agreed with us that if one country invades another, you've got to oppose that. And as he would say to his own specialist, "If your friend makes a mistake, you must not defend him." And the fact is, this was blatant aggression, and we had the vote of the UN, and we had the vote of almost every Arab country, except maybe Jordan, to go after Saddam Hussein.

And this is one of the most basic, I would say, rules of international... One country simply doesn't invade and take over another without any cause whatsoever. Now, this was a difficult

decision for Gorbachev because, as you say, many of his advisors were still looking as if the whole matter of the Middle East was a competition between the Soviet Union and the West. And actually, the problems there were much more insoluble, many of them; if it had been possible for the two of us to solve them, we probably would have, but it wasn't.

But anyway, what he saw was, at that time, he was then increasingly in need of American support. He was having more and more difficulties at home. And as a matter of fact, the... Bush actually met him in Helsinki to discuss that issue and got his commitment at least to abstain in the Security Council, not necessarily vote, but abstain to make it possible. And China also agreed to because this was an issue of blatant aggression.

I would also say that Bush, when we carried out the Gulf War, which we did with cooperation with about 45 countries, once he liberated Kuwait, he stopped. He didn't go to Baghdad; he didn't take out Saddam Hussein. He did exactly what he'd been authorized by the international community to do.

And I would also say that Gorbachev had a lot of simultaneous problems, and the country was beginning to come apart. He already had the violence in the South Caucasus. In January, one of the times, just as the war was beginning to start, and there were votes in the UN, was when there was an attack on the television tower in Vilnius, Lithuania, and the problems with that. So, in fact, I think that although some of his advisors wanted him to stay with Saddam Hussein, our position was, "Okay, let him leave Kuwait and we'll stand down." I mean, Saddam Hussein, and I think the Soviets tried to convince him, but he didn't. So, they took, actually, a few months for this to develop, and I think we gave Gorbachev and the Soviets every chance to have it solved peacefully simply by Saddam Hussein withdrawing to his own country.

Of course, there were a number of sentiments in the Soviet Union at that time in favor of the Iraqis, in favor of Saddam Hussein. There were demonstrations at our embassy, for example, but when I looked out at those demonstrators they were, I would say, at least 80% students from the area that were studying in Moscow. They weren't Soviet citizens, basically, getting that excited. Most Soviet citizens at that point were just trying to get enough to eat and survive in what were increasingly chaotic times.

Hanna Notte
Thank you, Ambassador. Quite a different picture from what we then saw in 2003 after the second Gulf War, but we'll come to that in –

Ambassador Matlock
Well, the second Gulf War was quite different.

Hanna Notte
Yes.

Ambassador Matlock
Quite different in almost every respect.

Hanna Notte
Yes. I do want to come to really one of the elephants in the room in any discussion about the trajectory of the U.S.-Russian relationship. And that is the issue of NATO expansion, which you've already touched upon.

Ambassador, there are many narratives and myths about what transpired in those crucial months in the early 1990s. Can you reflect for us on what was really promised to Gorbachev about the issue of NATO expansion at the time?

Ambassador Matlock
I think the use of the word 'promise' is probably not the right one. Here's the context: first of all, when President Herbert Walker Bush met with Gorbachev in Malta, in December 1989, they came to a very important agreement. One was that we're no longer enemies; the second was that the Soviet Union will not intervene in Eastern Europe if there's political change; and the third was the United States will not take advantage of changes there.

Now nobody, quite frankly, was thinking of the countries of the Warsaw Pact coming into NATO or not; that simply was not on anybody's mind. You still had the Warsaw Pact. The Berlin Wall had just come down, and it was still uncertain what was going to happen.

So, in December of 1989, Soviet policy changed very rapidly. When I came back from Malta, I called – just a few days after this was over – I called on Shevardnadze, the foreign minister, to review what went on. And I asked him, I said that, "I understand your policy is that a decision on German unity is one for the future?" He said, "Yes, we know that's a question that has to be resolved eventually. But it's one that will be resolved in the future. We have great confidence that the new regime in East Germany is determined to keep its statehood." This is at the end of the first week in December.

Just after Christmas I called on Ambassador Falin who then was head of the Central Committee – that he was known as Mr. Germany, as far as their foreign policy is concerned – and I asked him, I said, "I understand that you think this is a question for the future?" His answer was, "We thought it was a question for the future, but it's clear now, it's one that's going to be resolved now."

So they were very quickly seeing what was happening. And now in February, fairly early February, I think around the 10th and the 11th, Secretary of State Baker came to Moscow. And at that point, we were trying to set up a framework for dealing with the question of German unity. And we had proposed, with the cooperation of the West Germans, that it be resolved in a format of 'two plus four'. Two meaning that the two German states would negotiate and try to find an agreement, and four meaning that the four victorious powers from World War II would then, in effect, review and either accept or not the decision the Germans made.

And I know that when this was first floated with Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, at a meeting in Canada in January 1990, Shevardnadze's first answer was, "Why not four plus two?" And Baker said, "That may work in arithmetic, but it doesn't work in politics. We have to let the Germans make this decision." And then this was accepted. And, at that point, the Soviet position was, "Okay, if the Germans are insisting on unifying, there's one thing for sure: a united Germany will have to leave NATO for us to approve."

So, when Baker came to Moscow in February, he was trying to convince Gorbachev that it was actually in the Soviet interest for a united Germany to remain in NATO. And he consulted with German Foreign Minister Genscher on his way to Moscow, and he proposed an idea; he prefaced it by saying, "You don't have to give me an answer right now, but I want to tell you something you should think about." And the next sentence was, and I heard this so many times from him I can quote it literally, "Assuming there is no expansion of NATO jurisdiction to the east, not one inch, wouldn't it be better?"

And then he went on to explain the advantages of having a united Germany in NATO, of keeping their military united in one, and keeping an American role in military stability. Gorbachev answered immediately, "I'll think about it." And he said, "Obviously, any expansion of NATO jurisdiction to the east is unacceptable, but I understand what you're saying otherwise." And then he added, "It had been our policy to try to exclude you from Europe. That is not our policy today, I want you to know that. We want to preserve an American presence in Europe," meaning military presence, "because that can contribute to stability." He said, "Now, and I don't think you need 300,000 troops, but we want you in Europe, and that is part of our policy."

Well, and actually, Baker then repeated this to Shevardnadze. He repeated it to his delegation, including myself. In fact, as we rode in the car from the meeting, he recounted it to me and said, "What do you think?" And I said, "He's going to buy. Because the case you make is a very good case." Now, when Baker got back to Washington, the lawyer said, "Now wait, you can't include West Germany as part of Germany, and exclude it from NATO jurisdiction if Germany remains in NATO. That's a legal impossibility."

So, this question was not raised again, and there was no guarantee in the treaty, the Two Plus Four Treaty that was finally signed in the fall, and as a matter of fact, Soviet negotiators have said since then, they never thought they had a guarantee that NATO would not expand. They did have a guarantee that there would be no foreign, that is non-German, troops in the territory of East Germany, and that nuclear weapons would never be deployed there. That is in the treaty, but nothing about NATO expansion.

Now, I would also add that when we were talking about this, we were talking about Germany. We were not talking about the rest of Eastern Europe. Now obviously, if anybody had asked me in the summer of 1990, "Does that mean that there will be no expansion into Eastern Europe?" I would have said, "Well, of course." I mean, we're talking about Germany, and as a

matter of fact, if you remove your troops – and it was already evident that probably the Warsaw Pact wouldn't be continued; the East Europeans, once they went democratic, were almost certain to pull out of the Warsaw Pact. And I would have said, "There's absolutely no need to expand NATO."

And I would have considered that not a legal commitment, because it wasn't, but one that particularly in the context of the agreement, which was a formal one, we will not take advantage, because nobody could look at the changes of Eastern Europe, and then the way the subsequent... Now, I will add that it was not the Bush administration that expanded NATO. I'm quite convinced that if Bush had been reelected, he would not have. And we would have used the Partnership for Peace.

And one can say, "Well, why did we?" Well, first of all, because the East Europeans started demanding it, and we would say, "Well, they have a right to choose their alliances." Well also, the countries giving guarantees have the right to choose whom they guarantee or not, and whether that's a good idea. So, this idea that somehow a country has a right to join an alliance when the alliance hasn't necessarily invited them, is a rather, I would say, absurd idea. But the pressure did come from Eastern Europe and was supported by many, particularly, of our smaller NATO allies.

The real reason that Clinton went for it was domestic politics. I testified in Congress against NATO expansion, saying that it would be a great mistake, and that if it continued, that certainly it would have to stop before it reached countries like Ukraine and Georgia, that this would be unacceptable to any Russian government, and that furthermore, that the expansion of NATO would undermine any chance for the development of democracy in Russia.

And George Kennan had also said it was the greatest geopolitical mistake of that decade. And I think he was right.

But why, when I came out of that testimony, a couple of people who were observing said, "Jack, why are you fighting against this?" And I said, "Because I think it's a bad idea." They said, "Look, Clinton wants to get reelected. He needs Pennsylvania, Michigan, Illinois; they all have a very strong East European..." Many of these had become Reagan Democrats on East-West issues. They're insisting that the Ukraine [NATO] expand to include Poland and eventually Ukraine. So, Clinton needs those to get reelected.

But the fact is that, I think, the concluding issue there was domestic politics, and really not an understanding of, you might say, how best to handle the international relations.

At that time, I would say further on this matter of NATO expansion, that I think that the Clinton administration was quite disingenuous. Clinton personally told Yeltsin that the Partnership for Peace would be a substitute for NATO expansion, and Yeltsin said, "That's great. That's a brilliant idea."

At the very same time, our ambassador was instructed to tell the Poles, "This is the first step toward NATO membership." So, we were playing, I must say, to my dismay, duplicitous diplomacy at the time, and being motivated largely by domestic issues, not what would really preserve a Europe whole and free, which was the aim of our policy in the first Bush administration. And when we said Europe whole and free, that includes Russia. It's not just all except Russia.

Hanna Notte
Ambassador, fascinating. On the issue of a Europe whole and free, I do have one follow-up question to all you just said. I was intrigued by an argument that you make in your book, which is that, in fact, there was no need for NATO to expand eastward, because as you say, there were other ways those countries concerned could have been reassured and protected without seeming to redivide Europe, to Russia's disadvantage.

Could you explain a little bit more what other ways you had in mind? What could have been done differently?

Ambassador Matlock
Well, on the military side, the Partnership for Peace, which all of the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union were invited to be part of that. And that allows on a bilateral basis the maximum amount of military cooperation – help, for example, to maintain civilian control over the military.

In many cases, what they needed in Europe at that time was a great reduction of military spending, because, of course, in the '90s we had the problems in the Balkans, and these are separate issues but are relevant to politics at the time. But with the breakup of Yugoslavia, which, by the way, was not something the U.S. engineered; we did not want it to happen. I know many people think, particularly in Russia, that was part of some grandiose design. No, it wasn't.

But without getting into the details of that, I would say that it was very clear that if we had been able to establish an all-European security organization, that could have been done by expanding the powers of the organization of European unity coming out of the Helsinki Final Act. It could have been done by the Partnership for Peace between NATO and the individual countries, including Russia and Ukraine and others who wanted to. It was precisely the thing that Yeltsin enthusiastically accepted. And it was our moving off that, into that.

Now, on the other side, I would have to say that Russia never came up with a realistic proposal of how an all-European security situation would work. And the East Europeans, I guess, were so burned by the past and things of that, they began to think that only NATO protection can solve their problems, although in many cases their problems are internal, primarily, and something that a foreign alliance was not going to help them. But these perceptions, I think, began to dominate in many ways. But on the whole, I would say, the American motivation tended to be to satisfy domestic constituencies.

Hanna Notte
And I will continue with a question that's related, really, to the issue of NATO expansion and, to me, seems equally central when we debate U.S.-Russian relations. So, in your books, Ambassador Matlock, you discuss the concepts of empire, hegemony, leadership at great length, and you warn of imperialist ambitions in the modern world. You also acknowledge the pride and the distinct traditions of the various nationalities within the Soviet Union that you encountered on your travels, and you even recall a leitmotif in your book, saying that when you encountered people in the Soviet Republics, they would say to you, "Please, don't think of us as Russians; we are not Russians."

On the other hand, you point to Russia's complicated past with Georgia, with Ukraine, when you make the argument that we, the West, failed to take into sufficient consideration Russia's worries about these countries' future relations with NATO. So, let me ask you this: does Russia have a right to a sphere of influence in what's called the post-Soviet space, or, put differently, how far should Western countries go in taking Russian concerns into consideration when they're formulating their policies towards these countries?

Ambassador Matlock
That's an excellent question. My answer would be, first of all, it depends on what you mean by sphere of influence. Obviously, Russia, and no other country, should use the idea of sphere of influence the way, say, Japanese did in the 1930s when they occupied Manchuria – and saying that they had occupied Manchuria, and in effect made it a colony, because it was in their sphere of influence. That, in my opinion, is not a sphere of influence, that's pure imperialism and aggression.

It's quite another thing when you say that any country is going to be hypersensitive to other countries, particularly if they are in alliances that seem hostile to coming close to their borders. Of all the countries in the world, the United States should understand this. It's not a matter of international law any more than, I would say, gravity is a matter of law. I mean, gravity is there. And you can deny it, well, you know, okay, we never passed a law on gravity. But you damn well better pay attention, because as I said, of all countries, the United States for two centuries has followed a policy that no external power can have either a colony or be a member of a military alliance in the entire western hemisphere. Look how we reacted to Cuba and so on, and still are reacting.

Now, the idea that any Russian government could sit still for, say, Ukraine, which had been an integral part of the country, rightly or wrongly, for over two centuries, that they could sit still for Ukraine becoming a member of NATO. Among other things, it would eliminate one of their most important naval bases, which they legally hold, on that territory of Crimea.

So, to say that, well, it's aggression. No, I think that the idea that Russia would react negatively, and that Russia has the power to prevent others from coming in, is absolutely true. Nobody is going to fight a nuclear war. And I would say that never, in my opinion, in the history of the United States or Western Europe, has any of our security depended on precisely

where the line is between Ukraine and Russia. That is a very difficult, a very emotional issue, and one that I think that foreign intervention has created more problems, though it is basically an internal problem. So, you can say they have no right to a sphere of influence.

They are going to exercise a sphere of influence if they feel threatened, and any other government would also do so. And I think we have to understand that and not keep thinking that things are abstract. "Oh, we have a right to do this; we have a right to do that." Rights? There is no international authority that creates so-called political rights. And it seems to me that the idea... Second, I would say, as far as NATO expansion is concerned, neither Ukraine nor Georgia would qualify, because NATO supposedly never takes in a county which has internal problems. And the problems with the Donbass, the problems with Crimea, the problems with North and South Ossetia, of Abkhazia. These are internal problems.

And the idea of being, "Oh yes, if they're in NATO, Russia wouldn't interfere." It's not so much Russian interference, it is the local problem. And yes, Russia has supported one side, but on the other hand, I would think there's hardly another country you can think of that would not react if it feels its own security is ruined.

And one of the basic problems has been the development over the last 25 years of the feeling that Russia is an adversary or an enemy or something like that. There is no reason in the world to create that atmosphere, but step by step we have created it. Their reactions to our steps have intensified it, and it is reaching really absurd levels today. And at a time when we are trying to deal with a pandemic, at a time when we are increasingly being affected by climate change, by global warming, at a time when many of our countries are trying to cope with the floods of refugees and so on, to be disputing, fighting, using resources over these, you might say, border issues, by methods which actually exacerbate them rather than solve them, I find totally irrational.

We have far, far more common interests with Russia and with China than we have differences, and why our politicians can't understand that is beyond me. But I attribute most of it to our own domestic political scene. And I think unfortunately it's true of most countries, particularly large ones, that domestic politics trumps everything.

Hanna Notte

Thank you for that, Ambassador. I do have one question which relates a little bit to your day-to-day activity of being an ambassador on the ground in the Soviet Union. So, you stayed on as ambassador when George H. W. Bush came into office, and as I read in your books, you would soon send three telegrams to Washington, D.C., in 1989, where you would say, "Look, the Soviet leadership will continue to be preoccupied by internal reform. Perestroika will not bring fast improvements in the Soviet economy, and Soviet foreign policy will be less threatening militarily, so there might be a window of opportunity here."

And then, of course, there's also the famous telegram that you sent in July 1990, when you advised the White House to plan for a contingency of a collapse of the Soviet Union 18 months before it happened.
I really want to ask you, how were you making those judgments at the time? What clues were you looking for, what were you doing to analyze and read the situation correctly on the ground?

Ambassador Matlock
I was talking to people. Once Gorbachev gave us the opportunity to have wide contacts in society – suddenly, by 1988, in '89, the Soviet Union itself was opening up. And we would invite a whole range of political leaders to social functions. For example, I traveled to 12 of the republics – I was not allowed to travel to the Baltic countries while I was ambassador – and our staff really had contact with these developments as they were developing.

And while there were many things going on, one of them was that genuinely by... certainly by '90, by '89 and '90, the Gorbachev Central Committee was actually protecting democratic forces as they emerged in many republics. I mean, when I would go to Tashkent, I would find that there were groups of people who were democrats who were translating the American Constitution into Uzbek and so on. And the local Communist authorities would have suppressed them, but the Gorbachev Central Committee kept them from doing so.

I remember in '90 talking to Vasil Bykaŭ, the famous Belarusian writer, and he told me that if... that his writings would be prohibited from publication in Minsk, but he would appeal to Gorbachev's Central Committee in Moscow, which would order the Belarusians to publish them. In other words, Gorbachev's policies were creating, really, well, helping the forces that eventually brought it down, but at the same time, these were the democratic forces.

However, what really caused me to send that first one about the... the message in July 1990 that the Soviet Union could collapse, was because I found that the Russian elite was beginning to talk about the advantages of throwing off the Soviet Union. I should explain that many Russians – quite inaccurately – thought that the non-Russian nationalities were, say, feeding off them. And that, I know some would say, "Look, these Tartars, these Georgians, they'll never be Russians, why should they be part of Russia?" in a sense.

And I began, and others began, to say, "The Soviet Union, it really should become something like the EU. We don't need a unified state." And these were the people who were supporting Yeltsin; these were the people who were beginning to win elections when they had them. And I said, "Look, if the Russian elite no longer wants to preserve the Soviet Union, certainly..." Well, we knew the three Baltic states were going to insist on going, but, you know, Georgia was almost out of Moscow's control already by that time. And my conclusion was, look, as the country opens up and becomes more democratic, if there is not a strong push by the Russian intelligentsia, the Russian informers, to keep the Union together, they're not going to be able to.

And that's why, I would say... By the way, you didn't ask the question, but I will point it out: we did not have one single spy in the Soviet Union the years I was ambassador. We got all of our information by talking to people, by looking. It was not a matter of intelligence. But I am convinced that we understood better than Gorbachev himself did what the problems were, because the KGB was giving him distorted reports. They were saying, "Oh, this Landsbergis in Lithuania, he's just a rabble-rouser, he doesn't have any support."

So another conclusion to this is that we did not reach those conclusions through espionage. We did it the old-fashioned way. We simply looked and, particularly, listened to what was going on.

PART 2

Hanna Notte
Ambassador Matlock, your books do a fantastic job bringing to life American-Soviet diplomacy under Reagan and Gorbachev. And you conclude that these two individuals were really instrumental in shaping the trajectories of events at the time. In fact, you write that it is difficult to imagine how the Cold War could have ended, when and as it did, if both Reagan and Gorbachev hadn't been in office at that, at the same time.

And I generally noticed that you touched upon the significance of individuals rather frequently in your books. At one point, you even cite George Kennan as having said that "at the bottom of all human experience, there lies, after all, the mystery of the individual personality, its ultimate autonomy of decision, its interaction with the mass." But at the same time, you also point to the problem of bureaucratic inertia, of systems and structures adapting slowly to new circumstances, like after the end of the Cold War.

And, you know, I feel that we're confronted with this question about the individual versus structure quite often when we are thinking about today's Russia, because serious scholars often criticize the use of the term 'Putin's Russia' as being, really, too simplistic to capture the reality of contemporary Russia. But then others contend that there really can't be any meaningful change in Russia's domestic or foreign policy while the individual – Putin – is in power. So, what is your take on this question on the relative weight between the individual and structural forces in shaping events?

Ambassador Matlock
Well, personally, I would say, referring to one of your latter statements, the people who say that there could be no change in Russia as long as Putin is in power – I would say that I grew up and learned about the Soviet Union when most were convinced there could be no change in the Soviet Union as long as the Communist Party was in power. They were wrong. Now. All right, let's go back to the original question. You know, when you ask about – in the abstract – about, you might say, the hero in history, obviously there are things, or circumstances, that probably very much mitigate against change. I know one of my history professors who was

talking about this theory said, "You know, Bismarck is credited with, in effect, unifying many of the German speaking states to the German state under the leadership of Prussia."

But he said, well, and you can say, "Well, he was a great man because when he stopped guiding it, things really went very wrong." But he said, "Well, but suppose Bismarck had been born in Portugal." It's not that an individual, if he or she is strong enough or so on, that they necessarily are going to be able to change things. The reason I said that we were lucky that Gorbachev and Reagan were in office at the same time was because each of them did things that others in their party – that might have been elected or selected at that time – would not have done. Now, there were plenty of Democrats that could have negotiated the arms control treaties, but they could not have gotten them ratified in the American Senate.

And of course, one of the reasons these things were successful was that Gorbachev changed Soviet policy. And he changed it using the authority that he had as the general secretary of the Communist Party, and then, having changed the foreign policy and brought about an end to the arms race, he began to use that authority to institute reforms. Now, I don't think there was another plausible general secretary at the time he became general secretary who would have done that. So, that's why I say having those two individuals in the offices they had created something that, as we have already talked about, nobody predicted. Because in both cases, they were acting in a way that, perhaps, others could not have done.

In Reagan's case, it was not that there weren't other leaders that could have negotiated these agreements. But the fact that, given the American politics, they would have been very hard getting sufficient votes in the Senate to ratify them. So the fact that it was Ronald Reagan, who really could not be outflanked from the right, who expounded and backed these things. The INF treaty lost six votes in the Senate, all of them Republicans. And if you hadn't had Reagan, that same treaty would not have gone through the American Senate.

So, that's why I say in those cases, yes, I think that the individuals make a difference. It doesn't mean that an individual can overcome circumstances. And sometimes circumstances are perhaps overwhelming. And yes, part of getting things done is being able to maneuver and convince enough people on your side, given whatever the political situation is. In this respect, I might say, those with systems that are more authoritarian can often be more effective in foreign policy.

And so, I very much dislike the attempt today to say, well, some are more authoritarian than others. Well, that's true. And yet, particularly in a very divided society, sometimes you need an authoritarian streak, at least, to get anything done. And so, I think that we need to put all of these things in context, because the political leaders don't operate in a vacuum, or, you might say, a level playing field. There are always obstacles. There will always – if you are a leader trying to bring about change, particularly in your own society, this is probably the most difficult task at all. And therefore, it seems to me that... Well, let's take an American example: Lyndon Johnson and human rights. The fact that he was from Texas, was a southerner, enabled him to do things that other American presidents didn't do.

Now, if he hadn't had gotten us deeply involved in the Vietnam war, he would probably go down as one of our greatest presidents because of what he was able to do domestically. And, you might say, well, there were plenty of northern liberal Democrats who wanted to do these things, but could they have accomplished them? It really took a Lyndon Johnson to accomplish them. And was he a perfect person? Did everything he do praiseworthy? No. Absolutely not. But I think, again, when we are judging individual leaders and looking at the past, we have to put them in context, because they were operating in context.

Hanna Notte
Thank you so much for these reflections, Ambassador Matlock. There is an anecdote that you tell in your book, Superpower Illusions, which I really appreciated. It's this anecdote about a meeting that you attended in Soviet-occupied Latvia in 1986. And in fact, there were frictions at the time between the U.S. government and the Soviet Union; you still ended up going to that meeting in Latvia, even though some of your American colleagues criticized you for it. And you write in your book, and I quote you here, "Refusing to talk to an adversary is like turning into a dead-end street." And that it's basically a fallacy to confuse communication with appeasement or let alone capitulation.

But, you know, today it seems to me there is this widespread notion that our relations with Russia are so bad that one shouldn't, quote unquote, 'reward' Putin with dialogue. Now, from your experience, why is this a mistaken notion? And what would you say to those who argue – and I think there are frequently people today who argue this – you know, that dialogue and summits with Russia have in recent years really turned into these ceremonial, almost ritualized expositions of the two sides', the two parties' well-known positions; these positions are often incompatible, and so there's really no point to the summits and to these meetings.

Ambassador Matlock
Well, yes, it seems to me that if there is a problem, you have to communicate, and you have to be willing to listen to the other side and not just barrel ahead assuming that everything you do is perfect. That's going to simply exacerbate the situation. It doesn't help a thing. Now, going back to the situation that we had then, we had planned a meeting – a continuation of some of the meetings that we had had at Chautauqua, New York – and we wanted to hold one in the Soviet Union. And this had been worked out with Anatoly Dobrynin, who was then the Soviet ambassador in Washington. And he had been then transferred to Moscow and was working in the Communist Party Central Committee. The idea was that we would have a very frank debate.

And certainly, we had an American delegation among, I would say, some of our most... well, some of our most hawkish members. And we said, you know, we really want to explain clearly our position and debate it with them, and openly. And we were assured that we would be given television coverage in the entire country, and that the proceedings would be televised in full in Latvia. Now, there were people who said, "Oh, we shouldn't go because we don't recognize the Soviet occupation of Latvia." And my position was, "Of course we should go."

And I can explain that we don't recognize that Latvia is legally a part of the Soviet Union. I knew that so many Latvians, like Lithuanians and Estonians, were worried that we simply considered them Russians.

And I thought, well, we can certainly show them that we have an interest, and I'll even start my speech with a few paragraphs in the Latvian language and then finish the rest in the Russian language, in which I could express myself more adequately. Now, it happened that at that time we were in one of these spats about spies. We had arrested a Soviet citizen who worked for the United Nations, who was caught in espionage, and he did not have diplomatic immunity. So, in response, the Soviets arrested an American journalist who was not a spy, but also did not have diplomatic immunity. And so, we were having this big controversy over the arrest of Nicholas Daniloff. And his wife went on television. And the others said, "Oh, we shouldn't hold this conference. We shouldn't reward them as long as they were holding Daniloff."

Well, it seemed to me that staying away from that conference was certainly not going to bring any pressure on the Soviet Union, and the opportunity to put our case on television before the Soviet people, I thought, was a very important one. But this became so politically charged at home. I know some of the... The Friday evening before we were to leave, one of the journalists, who was very popular, was saying, "Well, this White House official Jack Matlock is going to violate our non-recognition things by actually going to Latvia, even though Daniloff still being held." Well, I was working then on the National Security Council staff, and I called the assistant to George Shultz, the secretary of state, and said, "Well, does the secretary want me to go or not?"

And he called back to say, "The secretary said you're a grown man; make up your mind." And so, then I asked the national security advisor to check with the president – John Poindexter was then advisor. He did, and he said, "Well, the president thinks you ought to go. We need to communicate." And I said, "Well, that's good enough for me." And, you know, as I said, one of the first statements I made was that we do not recognize the legality of the inclusion of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania in the Soviet Union. Later, these meetings continued at Chautauqua, New York, and after the Soviet Union broke up, one of the leaders of the Latvian Independence Movement said, "That's what gave us the start. We really –most people didn't know that that was your policy; but if you didn't recognize, we had a chance."

And so, this really, really began to fuel the independence movement in Latvia. So the idea, and I would say that some of the harder-line members of our delegation refused to go: "Well, we're not going to go there while they're holding Daniloff." You know, you are cutting off your nose to spite your face, in effect, because it's very necessary. But the idea that you are somehow rewarding somebody else because you talk to them is, I think, quite mistaken, among other things. It indicates that you're not willing to deal with them as equals. You're not willing to deal with them, to respect...

I think, in general, that is the opposite of what it should be. And I'll go back; I remember one of the things that President Reagan used to say. It was in – at one point, he said, "And regarding our dealings with the Soviet Union," this is when things were still tense, he said, "We've got to stop talking about each other so much and talk to each other more." But it wasn't just a matter of talking to each other. It was also – you got to learn to listen, to try to understand the other point of view.

And so, it's not that there's a magic in summit meetings. Both sides, if they're going to have them, used to be they want to be able to come back and say they achieve something important. But the fact is, if you are meeting, normally your staffs are going to be instructed to try to agree on as much as you can. And then to narrow the things they discussed to some of the key issues. And this can be important. I've never thought that it was useful to exclude others because of their policies from negotiation, because that just motivates them to be even more trouble, because they've got no incentive, really, to listen to you if you're not even going to talk to them.

Hanna Notte
Fascinating, thank you for sharing that story with us, and this notion of listening I'll come back to in another question a bit later. Right now, I want to ask you about something else. In your books, you draw attention a few times to diplomatic episodes where issues had to be handled quietly, privately. For example, when a Soviet defector provided the United States intelligence, I believe in 1989, with some intel on the ongoing existence of a Soviet biological weapons program, even though the USSR had signed and ratified the Biological Weapons Convention. Ambassador Matlock, why is it sometimes so important to address things in private in diplomacy? [Could you point] to some pertinent examples from your own career? And I also want to ask you this: is such an approach of handling things delicately, quietly, still possible today in diplomacy, in our age of ubiquitous social media coverage, and this demand by our publics for unconditional transparency from the political leadership?

Ambassador Matlock
I think that there are times when, if you're going to reach agreement, it really has to be developed in private, because usually on both sides, there are so many vested interests that if you get too public, you're going to have really major problems in solving it. Now, you referred to an instance when we discovered, because of defectors, that we were absolutely sure that there was a Soviet biological warfare program still in violation of their treaty obligations. And this, we found out jointly with the British. And so, the British ambassador and I were instructed to go to the foreign minister and to Gorbachev's advisor and simply say, "Look, we have this information. Close it. Because if we get into a big public hassle over this, it's going to be very hard to solve."

We were then negotiating, almost ready for the strategic arms treaty. It was when – it was the buildup to the war, the Gulf War, where we needed their support in the UN. The Soviet Union itself was beginning to fall apart. We had so many things on there. We don't need, you know, a public issue over that. And, well, to make a long story short, Gorbachev... First of all, his own

people had misled and lied to most of theirs. We were told later that Shevardnadze, the foreign minister, had never been told that they had the program. Although they suspected it, because we were constantly complaining, but people would come from the program and deny that they were doing anything illegal.

And so... what we got then was a request to – we both had acknowledged, well, programs, defensive programs. And by the way, a specialist can easily distinguish an offensive from a defensive program from the type of equipment you have. So they asked if we would have an exchange of specialists who would look at the suspect facilities, and the first reaction I got from the United States was, "No way, we don't have any problems here. Why are they asking for this?" And I said, "Look, we should accept that, because I'm sure they have told their people that they are doing it because we're doing it. And since we are not doing it, let's let them see that."

Well, that happened. And the number two in the program, their program, was there. He later defected and wrote a book. His name is Alibekov. He wrote a book about the program and said that, genuinely, he had thought we had one until he went there and actually saw that we didn't, and that therefore, they started closing things down. But the bureaucracy was such, we couldn't be sure that they would even follow Gorbachev's order to close it down. That was one of the problems in the Soviet Union – that the KGB, many elements of the military, and the other, were not completely under control of the leader.

So, this was an example of a very serious problem that it was much easier to dissolve. And I would even go back to the Cuban missile crisis. The deal that ended that, which was not announced at the time, was one that, if the Soviets would remove their nuclear missiles from Cuba, we would later remove the ones we had put in Turkey. After all, we had been the first to deploy intermediate range missiles that could hit the Soviet Union. And now, part of that deal was this would not be announced.

But Khrushchev accepted that. And I would say even those of us in Moscow did not know about that deal. The fact was we agreed, in effect, to remove them, and that was done by what they call the back channel. Kennedy's brother, who was an attorney general, was dealing with the KGB resident in Washington. And by the way, we generally knew who was running the spy agency in our capital, and these communications were sometimes used. And as a matter of fact, we had rather regular consultations between the CIA and the KGB in Vienna about issues to try to dim down misunderstandings. But the point is that sometimes, if issues are extremely delicate, you really need to talk about them privately.

I was getting signals all the time earlier, when I was in charge of the American embassy in Moscow, and before I was ambassador, that they wanted sort of a back channel to discuss things like arms control. And we would offer them sometimes that in certain issues. These were particularly useful when you were dealing with an issue where our domestic special interests are so powerful that if you go public before you have a deal which you can defend, they will do everything they can to block it.

So thinking about this issue in general, I recall that one of the principles that President Woodrow Wilson enunciated was that there should be open conventions, openly arrived at. My professor of International Relations at Columbia, Phillip Mosely, said he got it wrong. We need open conventions, secretly arrived at, because if every negotiation is totally open, you'll probably never get anywhere because of vested interests on both sides who will wreck it if they think their own parochial interests are being affected.

Hanna Notte
And so, you think these delicate negotiations are still possible today to the same extent that perhaps they were possible during the Cold War?

Ambassador Matlock
No, they're not possible if your public image is one attacking and personally denigrating the other leader. This is something I do not understand: how intelligent, well-meaning people can allow international relations get into sort of a personal battle. Now, Ronald Reagan very famously called the Soviet Union an evil empire, and he was unsparing in his criticisms of communism. He never once denigrated an individual Soviet leader, and when he would meet them, his first words were usually, "We hold a piece of the world in our hands; we must operate responsibly." And even though we thought of Andrei Gromyko as 'Mr. Nyet' and so on, he was given full honors at the White House, treated virtually as a chief of state, with formal dinners and so on.

And I would say, well, this is one of the differences President Reagan had from many other leaders, is – and maybe it was because he was trained as an actor; after all, he was trained to put himself in the shoes of other people. And what interested him in our briefings before he met the Soviet leaders was not so much the details of arms control or these other issues. Frankly, he would often dose off if you get into too much detail on that. What he concentrated on was, who is this fellow Gorbachev? Where is he coming from? How can we establish more trust between us?

And I would say he was person – and he understood, yes, he is not a dictator. He's got a Politburo. And therefore, he's going to be a tough negotiator. And in a sense, he had what we would call empathy, which is different from sympathy. He really wanted to understand where the other person was coming from. Now, if that's the case, then simply to demonize another leader, as has been done both by the media and, unfortunately, our own political leaders with President Putin, I think is simply a no-win sort of thing. You don't achieve one thing from that. Now, that... that's not a defense of anything that President Putin has done. But the fact is, you're not going to get anywhere dealing with these problems unless you deal with them with a certain respect.

And we should recognize that he brought Russia out of bankruptcy. He brought them out of chaos, and we might not like some of the things, but the Russians still have the right to travel abroad, the right to travel internally, things that were extremely constricting with the Soviet

Union. But to act as if nothing has changed, again, is simply, I think, wrong. So that... I think it's very clear: if you get anywhere, you have to treat your interlocutor with personal respect. It doesn't mean you have got to praise them or so on. After all, who authorized us to hand out report cards on leaders of other countries? I mean, that shouldn't be; we may have our opinions, and our media and non-governmental organizations certainly should express opinions.

But as far as the president and the U.S. government, we need to keep, I would say, a respect... We need to deal with other leaders with a certain respect and not get into personal accusations or, for that matter, defenses.

Hanna Notte
Ambassador Matlock, your reflections just now on the importance of empathy are a perfect segue to my next question, which is about the importance of Russian culture. So, your own path to becoming a distinguished diplomat, serving your country in Russia and its neighborhood, started with a passion for the Russian language and for Russian literature. And that passion gave you an important window into understanding your interlocutors in Russia, gave you an appreciation for Russian culture, and you emphasize the importance of culture also quite frequently in your books. Culture, but also related notions, like social norms, ideology, concepts of honor and prestige, for developing empathy for the other side.

So I'd like to ask you, can you reflect a little bit on instances of American practice of what we might call diplomacy of empathy versus diplomacy of imposition and how an understanding for culture can make us better diplomats of empathy?

Ambassador Matlock
Yes. Well, I think that one of the jobs of a diplomat is to understand the country to which he or she is assigned, and to convey that understanding back to their own government. I would say, when I was teaching courses on diplomacy, "A diplomat is the eyes, ears, and voice of his government." I would say 'government' rather than 'country', because it's the government you're representing. They are specifically representing the president, and in the case of American diplomats – so, in another country. Now, obviously the more you know about the local culture, including the language, the history, the economic conditions, social structure, et cetera – all of these things, the better you are able to assess what goes on. That's far more important than spies or intelligence. Intelligence is important if you want to know precisely how many weapons they have and what the capabilities are.

But as far as politics, by far, to understand the country and its policies, one really needs to know the society and if possible, if conditions allow, to know personally the leaders who make that policy. So, it seems to me this is just axiomatic. Now, having said that, as far as a government is concerned, a lot depends upon how you use your ambassadors. If the ambassadors are simply not listened to or consulted in policymaking, or if they are political appointees that are appointed simply because they made a large contribution – not all the

political appointees are bad ambassadors, I would say. Sometimes they can be very good and even knowledgeable about the countries, but often they are not.

But the thing is, it is up to the government, the chief of state, the foreign minister as to how you use the ambassadors. Sometimes you can send them out as a political reward and simply ignore them. Or, as I said, I was incredibly lucky having worked directly with President Reagan before he sent me as ambassador, and also knowing very well Vice President Bush, who then became the president. So I was in an ideal position that I knew them. They knew me. They consulted me. We were able to work together in a way that, quite honestly, is fairly rare among diplomats and governments, I would say, rather than diplomats. But certainly, I was able to do my job better because I was able to, in effect, immerse myself in Soviet culture.

And I say "Soviet" because I paid as much attention to the non-Russian republics as I did to Russia. But also, and I think this, in my case, is extremely important: the fact that I was genuinely interested in Russian culture, that I could read the literature for sheer pleasure. In fact, it's one of the things that has really enriched my life, entirely aside from diplomacy. This gave me, I would say, I think, an empathy for the country, even when our relationships were most difficult. I absolutely hated communism. I did understand it. I thought it was an ideology that had been imposed upon a great people, the Russian people. And I was never one that would shirk from debating or telling them when they did something wrong.

But shortly after I arrived as ambassador, I was asked by a junior Soviet diplomat, one who often took notes in my meetings with the foreign minister. He came to a reception, and when he came through the line, he said, "I wonder if I could have a word with you later?" I said, "Well, sure." And when we had greeted the other guests, I took him aside and said, "What's on your mind?" And he said, "I got a question for you." "Okay." And he said, "You can come in and you can say things to my boss that if anybody else said them, he would climb the walls in fury. But from you, he takes it. What's your secret?" I had not been asked that question before, and I thought a minute. And you know, I said, "Basically, I think he senses that I love this country, and I hate what has happened to it. And I have to express that."

And he said, "I thought that was true. And I wondered if you understood it," which is one of the most memorable conversations I had, because basically it was true. I mean, I felt a great attraction to the cultural depth of the Russian theater, of Russian literature. I was fully aware of all of the, I would say, the horrors of Stalinism and the imposed ideology. And I knew that this was not the real Russia that I knew. And I think this was sensed. Also, as a matter of public relations, when they gave me access to television and actually, after Gorbachev began to open up the country from – particularly from 1989 on, I had many interviews, sometimes on national television. One of them ran for an hour.

And the thing is that most of the Soviet people were not that interested in discussing detail of arms control or other political issues. They wanted to know which poets I had translated, which writers I was most interested in. And being able to discuss, at a reasonable level, their own culture, their own literature, conveyed an image, not of a threatening country, which is an

enemy, but of one that really was interested in them and cared about them and was certainly not going to go to war. So this was, obviously, things that we didn't talk about directly that often. But I do think that the ability to communicate on the same grounds as the people's culture...

The other thing was that when there were changes, I was able, I think, and my staff – I have to say, I think these things I'm talking about apply to many on my staff. I had one of the greatest staffs that has ever been assembled at, I think, any embassy, and not just American ones. Our staff, they knew Russian, many of them knew other languages of the Soviet Union. They traveled, they kept in touch.

And so, I think that we were able to understand what was going on in the country. And as I may have already mentioned, I believe, later, even better than Gorbachev understood. Because we did have contacts, we did have said some rapport with the people; even if we were sort of at opposite ends of policy issues, we could explain, we could try to find a way that would satisfy both sides. I would add, as I'm talking about this, that, yes, this is important, but for diplomacy, you also have to know your own country.

And that's one thing that sometimes people ignore. You need to know the attitudes of the people in your bureaucracy and others in order to select the best arguments. As I often said, when I was working, I would always make a recommendation I thought was the correct one. But if I were explaining it to Henry Kissinger, it would be a different explanation than if I was explaining it to Cyrus Vance, for example, to name two different secretaries of state. Because by understanding where they come from, you can help to place this within their scheme of attention and values and defend it from that standpoint.

So, it's a matter of balancing. I think it is also a matter of being absolutely truthful. There is this old halfway joke about the British ambassador who was going off to be ambassador, I think, in Turkey to the Ottoman empire. And he stopped at a friend in Western Europe on their way and wrote in the guest book in Latin that an ambassador is an honest man who goes abroad to lie for his country. Now, this was a double entendre because the instruction at that time to a foreign ruler was that one sovereign was sending a representative, an ambassador, to represent him, "to lie near you," meaning to live near you. But this became "to lie abroad for his country." And my answer to that was: in my opinion, effective diplomacy is, must be truthful. And there is only one permissible lie, which is, "I don't know."

Now, there are things that obviously, because of your secrecy rules, you can't discuss directly, and we all understand that. But you don't say something to mislead. And I think that's a true, effective diplomacy. So the idea that you're sent abroad to trick other people or, as some have said, well, you say "nice doggy" until you can pick up a stick. No, that is not diplomacy. I think it has to be absolutely frank, and I think it is entirely possible to oppose certain policies quite vigorously and argue against them without insulting the other person and without somehow denigrating them personally.

Obviously, the people you're dealing with, also the other diplomats, they're representing their political system. And one has to understand that. So anyway, one could go on and on about this because there are so many qualities, but I think that for effective diplomacy, you need to make sure you are accurately representing your government.

If you have disagreements about policy, you should be able to let your government know, but not anybody else. In other words, once the president or the secretary of state decides what the policy is going to be, you must try to execute that faithfully. That's also part of it. So, there are so many factors here, and I would say very often, very often, governments, particularly American governments, don't make full use of their diplomats. I think we have one of the finest diplomatic services in the world, or at least we had, until very recently, when it has taken a number of blows, but, and more often than not, the professionals are either ignored or sidelined.

Hanna Notte
Fascinating, Ambassador Matlock, and I do want to ask a follow up question on a few important moments that we just touched upon. This importance of understanding your own side, your own government. You also mentioned previously, it's important how a government chooses to use its ambassador abroad. So I want to ask you to reflect a little bit about the process of foreign policy making in the U.S. It appears to be a complex process with a crowded actor landscape. We have the president, the secretary of state. We have an interagency process, Congress, the media. Who makes foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia? And when the Washington bureaucracy is in direct contact with Moscow, which I imagine must happen frequently, then what is the role of the ambassador on the ground, and what are some of the constraints and opportunities within which the ambassador operates?

Ambassador Matlock
There is, among the countries that are most important to their counterparts, you might say, the secretary of state, even the presidents or the prime ministers do a lot of direct conversation. Now you can have classified telephone calls, even, probably, classified calls on the equivalent of Zoom or Skype. And so, there is much more possibility of the direct contact between the senior people without going through their embassies. That has changed things a lot.

Now, that has several implications. One thing is, if your country, as the United States, really has global interests and has diplomatic and consular representations in virtually all the independent countries in the world – and they're close to 200, now – there is no way in the world that the secretary of state or the president can take care of more than just a few.

And yet, relations with these other countries are extremely important. And, of course, the functions of embassies include a lot of things other than negotiating with the top. You are protecting American citizens. You are promoting American commerce. There are many on-the-ground jobs that require diplomacy in the sense of knowing the local people, knowing the

local lands. Americans travel widely, at least before COVID. And they do get into trouble elsewhere, and the consular officer has to deal with that.

They lose their passport sometimes. And so, we have many reasons to have very active and compliment diplomatic things, other than talking to the top people. But the thing is, if they rely almost exclusively on that, then they are really missing, I think, the possibility, because you really need the people on the spot who, day after day, continually, or, you might say, are monitoring what is going on in the society.

And when you do prepare your talking points for these telephone calls, usually that's done by your staff, and the staff – to the degree they can rely upon an active and knowledgeable embassy – they will prepare these in cooperation with the staff, let the staff know in advance. Often, if you're going to make a speech, or if you're going to meet the other leader, you want to alert the staff to any new proposals you are making, and try to make sure you get a positive response. And through diplomatic channels, you can say, "Look, this particular thing is a no-no here. Can't you emphasize something else?"

So, in other words, there's so all sorts of ways that the staff can help guide the leaders when they use them correctly, even though they're having more direct contact. On the whole, I think that direct contact is good. But I think it can be a problem if a given president or secretary of state think they know it all, and really don't need a lot of advice. And that has happened at times.

Hanna Notte
Thank you so much for that. Ambassador Matlock, we have talked a lot about the Soviet period. We've talked about the 1990s. I want to come to 9/11 as an inflection point. You point out in your books that perhaps after 9/11, there was a chance to change the dynamics of the U.S.-Russia relationship when President Putin decided to cooperate with the United States in the so-called global war on terror. But what then followed instead was the U.S.'s unilateral abrogation of the ABM treaty, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, further NATO eastward expansion, and so on and so forth. And then, eventually, we ended up with President Putin's famous 2007 Munich speech, and the Russia-Georgia war of 2008. So, I want to ask you, do you think there really was a chance in 2001 to set the relationship onto a different trajectory, considering all that had gone wrong in the 1990s already?

Ambassador Matlock
Yes. I think we would've had a much better relationship if our policy had been different during the second Bush administration. I think that continuing to expand NATO, I think, was a mistake. I think, frankly, that once we took in Czechoslovakia and Hungary and Poland, we almost had to include the three Baltic states. And I think Putin reluctantly accepted that. I remember he was asked about it before it happened, in a speech in New York. And he said, "Well, I don't think it's necessary, but it's not..." In other words, they did understand that, as far as the three Baltic countries are concerned, that they, you might say, historically, legally

and other things, are in a different position from the other countries in the so-called near abroad, that is the other ex-Soviet republics.

But what happened was that not only did we continue to expand NATO, not only did we conduct an aggressive war against Iraq without UN sanctions and actually against opinion not only of Russia, but also allies Germany and France, and, at the same time, we were going out of arms control treaties. The ABM treaty, which had been, you might say, the anchor of arms reduction with the Soviet Union. We then signed an agreement which was so general. We had no verification, nor did we destroy those weapons that were taken off alert; until we got the New START treaty in the Obama administration, we, in effect, had walked out of all the verification measures that had taken us decades to negotiate during the Cold War.

So, I think these were all very serious mistakes, and then, as we began to take the countries in the Balkans into NATO, and then to talk about, and by 2008, actually vote to put Ukraine and Georgia on, you might say, on a road to NATO membership. This was crossing a very clear red line. And so that, I do think that at that time, different policies could have brought about an entirely different result. Now, I would say that if we expected Russia to become a 'democracy', I'll put that in quotes, if it operates just like it does in the United States, then no, I think that was, that was an impossible dream, at least at the time.

And frankly, some of our problems developed because, clearly, we were expressing strong preferences over some factions over others. We like to talk now about foreign interference in American elections. I would say, for several decades, the U.S. interfered whenever it thought its national interests were involved, and deterred only by not appearing to do so, because they knew that could backfire. So, this idea that nations shouldn't interfere in elections of others, well, nations do. And usually, they create more harm for their candidates than support if they do it too openly.

But to continue, I would say the speech that President Putin made in Munich listed the problems he had. And, I would say, in my opinion, none of those things were necessary to American security. We would have been better off without them. And in general, our overt support for the so-called color revolutions, I think were quite unwise.

Now, it's not that the people that were demonstrating did not have valid grievances; they did. But to appear to be trying to support unconstitutional changes, not just influence elections, but trying the overthrow of other governments by a faction that favored us and, in many cases, had the goal of NATO membership – I think this became very destructive, because one thing no Russian government could tolerate would be taking countries like Ukraine or Georgia into an alliance, a military alliance hostile to Russia.

These were, I think, very big mistakes. And now, I think that Putin's reactions sometimes have, and often have not been in the interest of Russia. So yes, there was a, you might say, a mutual escalation. I do think it started with the actions by the United States. I think there was overreaction on the other side, and then the development of a personalization of the problem

has only made it more difficult. But to get back to your question, yes, I think there was a possibility of having, of developing much more normal relations, relations which would not have been a Russia with a system precisely like ours. How could that possibly be the case: two countries with such different history and such different, you might say, geographical locations.

After all, we have two oceans separating us from Eurasia on each side, whereas Russia occupies a very large part of Eurasia with most of its neighbors along land borders. The situation of the two is quite different. So, I think that, as I had mentioned earlier, the effort that we made, a quixotic effort to quote 'support democracy', and the methods that we used, didn't actually support democracy but actually exacerbated problems that developed there and elsewhere in the world.

Hanna Notte
Thank you for that, Ambassador Matlock. I think we have covered a lot of ground in our conversation about the things that didn't go quite right in the relationship over the past decades. I want to come to today. It appears to me sometimes that, nowadays, Russia uses 'whataboutism': a criticism of what it sees as U.S. double standards; criticism of past U.S. foreign policy mistakes, almost as a sort of knockout argument to stifle any substantive discussion on any policy issue. I'll give you one example: the moment that you criticize, for instance, Russian policy in Syria, Russian diplomats will make references to the United States' mistakes in Iraq in 2003, or in Libya in 2011.

And this doesn't always make for the most constructive or substantive debate on the actual issue at hand. So I want to ask you, given all that happened, how do we overcome this vicious cycle of both sides constantly dishing up the other side's past policy mistakes?

Ambassador Matlock
I think there is a way to get away from that. You know, when I helped draft a speech that President Reagan gave about U.S.-Soviet relations that was given actually a year before Gorbachev came into the general secretaryship in the Soviet Union, what we did instead of... We set forth what we called a four-part agenda of things that we wanted to do with the Soviet Union. One of these was to reduce arms. And another was to reduce our confrontation, military confrontation, in third areas where we were backing different factions in local wars. Third, and one of the most important, was to improve human rights. And then the fourth was to try to break down the iron curtain and have more, actually, communication between our countries.

Now, how do you phrase that? Do you say they've got to reduce their arms? They've got to stop interfering in foreign countries, they must respect more human rights? And by the way, they need to open up their country? That's not the way we put it. What we said is we must cooperate to achieve arms reduction. We must cooperate to withdraw from involvement in other people's wars. We must cooperate to improve human rights. We must cooperate to improve our bilateral relationship. We didn't say, "Tear down the iron curtain." We said, "Let's develop a better working relationship."

In other words – and I think the word cooperation was used something like 30 times in that speech. When Secretary of State Shultz met the first time with Eduard Shevardnadze, just after Gorbachev had named him foreign minister, he [Shultz] always started the meeting with a list of human rights cases in the Soviet Union. And he handed Shevardnadze that list, and Shevardnadze said, "Okay, I'll take this, but tell me, can we talk about the status of women and Blacks in the United States?" And Shultz said, "Yes, of course." He said, "I think we're making progress, but we've got a way to go, and we can use all the help we can get." That was his attitude.

So, we made these issues. It was not a matter of denying we have a problem or saying that these were all equivalent. And it was only two years later when the two of them met in New York, and Shultz always began his presentation with a request for human rights. He gave Shevardnadze the list of refuseniks, political prisoners and others. Shevardnadze took that. He looked up at Shultz. They were on a first name basis by then he said, "George, I'll take this back to Moscow. And if what you say I can confirm, I'll do my best to correct it." He paused. And then he said, "But I want you to know one thing. I'm not doing this because you asked me to; I'm doing this because it's what my country needs to do." Shultz stood up, other side of the table, put out his hands. And as they shook hands, Shultz said, "Eduard, let me assure you, I will never ask you to do something that I do not think is in your country's interest."

I had trouble keeping the tears back. I was at the table watching that. The Cold War was over for those two. So, you know, it depends on how you frame it. And today, we say, well, Russia has invaded Ukraine. Well, yes, they have supported the separatists in the Donbass. But when the Russians say, "Well, who are you to sanction us for that, when you invaded Iraq? Iraq had not attacked you. You had not approved it in the UN. You used false information. You are accusing us of belligerence?" Quite frankly, I think they have a point. And I think this is not the, you know, 'whataboutism'. But I think obviously the way to deal with it is to recognize that we're not perfect either. And as a matter of fact, if you be perfectly fair, we have been more egregiously belligerent than Russia has over the past 20 years.

And one can talk about some of the things individually, but it seems to me that our official line in that of many, much of our media has been so one-sided that we're simply unable to see that there is another side, and things are not quite, in fact, not nearly as simplistic as some of our charges are made.

Hanna Notte

Thank you so much for that, Ambassador Matlock. This has been such a rich and diverse conversation. I'm sure future generations of diplomats and scholars will benefit from it. I do want to turn to my last question for you today, if I may. Now, given all that we have discussed today, given all that you have experienced throughout your long career, what do you think it takes to set the U.S.-Russia relationship on a fundamentally different trajectory? To return to the role of individuals, do you think this can only happen when the stars align again, and we happen to have two individuals, two visionary leaders, another Reagan-Gorbachev kind of

combination in the White House and in the Kremlin? Or is it indeed necessary that we relearn our history, that we converge on an interpretation – the West and the Russian side – on an interpretation of what went right and wrong in the 1990s in order for us to move forward?

And I want to come here to one quite amazing insight that you share in one of your books. And it really sort of stuck with me. You write in *Autopsy of an Empire* that "faithful convulsions in history have always produced a variety of interpretations." And then you cite World War I, the fall of the Roman Empire, the end of the Cold War. So, do we really need to agree on the history of the relationship in order to chart a better path forward?

Ambassador Matlock
I don't think we need to come to complete agreement to have a much, I would say, more productive relationship, a relationship that is much more in accord with the true national interests of our peoples. And I don't think we need different leadership to do it. We just need different policies. First of all, we need to understand that the most important threats we face today, we both threat [face] together. The pandemic, global warming, the breakdown of states and the whole flow of refugees that comes from wars, but also from global warming and climate change. These are big issues. These are issues alone, and then there is the matter of control of nuclear weapons, which is truly an existential issue for us both. This is so much more important than the sort of things we are now quarreling over, that we really need leaders that will recognize that.

And let's put things in perspective, and let's stop trying to run other people's business. Yes, human rights are important, but we may have different views of them. And none of us are perfect. None of us have a system that necessarily is quite right for other people. We have to step back and understand that. So I would say, if we had leaders that concentrated on the main things and kept the inevitable competitions peaceful, that I think we could, with our current leadership, do a much better job. I think it has been really a shame that with the pandemic, we haven't had more solidarity. Obviously, we're not going to get that under control until it's under control everywhere. It's not only important to vaccinate our own people; we need to get other people vaccinated.

And therefore, I mean, I think that, for example, the government-financed research for vaccines should result in a sort of open technology so that you license without large charges, production anywhere, and so on. I think there are a lot of things we could have been doing differently. And so that, I think it is going to take a willingness to concentrate on the big issues which should unite us, because it affects us all, rather than these issues that divide us, most of which are not nearly as important as the bigger ones.

Hanna Notte
Thank you for that. And thank you again, Ambassador Jack Matlock, for being with us today and sharing all your insights and expertise.

Ambassador Matlock
Thank you for your very insightful questions.

The Ambassadorial Series: Deans of U.S.-Russia Diplomacy

Transcripts of the Interviews

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Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering

Dates of Service as U.S. Ambassador in Moscow: 1993-1996

PART 1

Hanna Notte
Ambassador Pickering, thank you so much for joining us in this sequel to the first Ambassadorial Series today. It's a real honor for me to speak with you. You had a long and distinguished career serving the U.S. government, including as ambassador to India, Israel, El Salvador, Nigeria, and, of course, the United Nations. And you were also under secretary of state for political affairs. Today, however, we will speak about your engagement with one particular country, and that is Russia, where you served as ambassador in the early to mid 1990s. So, welcome.

Ambassador Pickering
Thank you, Hanna. It's a pleasure to be back with you. I'm looking forward to the conversation. Thank you very much for being the best and the other part of this conversation.

Hanna Notte
Thank you. Ambassador Pickering, let us start with the early 1990s. You served as ambassador in Russia from May 1993 until November 1996. Rather interesting and turbulent times, I should say. And you witnessed, among other events, the 1993 constitutional crisis, and indeed, you shared your precise and detailed recollections of events on the ground in the preceding interview in this Ambassadorial Series with Jill Dougherty.

Now, today, I would like to talk with you about the political implications of those events. We had the standoff between Yeltsin and the Parliament, the siege of the White House, and those events were perhaps the culmination of unresolved tensions that characterized this young Russian Federation. I mean, Gorbachev had attempted to convert the old USSR, if you wish, into a state based on the consent of the governed. He faced much resistance in doing so. That resistance then continued to brew, and then we get to 1993. I want to ask you, how were you reflecting on the political implications of events in Moscow in 1993, on the different possible scenarios of how this could turn out, and the repercussions, not just for Russia domestically, but also regionally and geopolitically? How were those things debated within the U.S. government?

Ambassador Pickering
It's a complex and challenging question, and in many ways reflects the complexities and the challenges that were present in Russia at that time. I think at rock bottom, and let me start there, Gorbachev was widely discredited in Russia, in large measure because of his withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact area, particularly Poland, and the removal of the group of Soviet forces from Germany, which meant, in effect, that he had given up the colonial empire to the west of

Russia, amassed by Stalin as a result of enormous sacrifices that he called upon Russia to make in defeating Nazi Germany at the time.

Secondly, this bred a natural outcome in which there was polarization in Russia. And, one could say, polarization between many different standards and many different outlooks, but primarily the poles were: one, Mr. Yeltsin's leadership of an uncertain direction, of an uncertain group of people, leaning toward what one could only characterize as a more democratic, more people-oriented, maybe more people-centered Russian republic, but with little or no idea about how to get there. The second major pole was essentially the return to Communist governance, Communist governance in a sense that everyone, in those days, over age 40 was still attached to – in large measure because of the very effective propaganda of the Soviet Union – and indeed, their sense that, as a group of people, they were better served by Communism than they were by the disruption and disasters that they saw occurring around them as Communism collapsed.

Gorbachev was an interesting man, because in my interviews with him, and I had a number, he constantly harked back to the view that Communism was really a good thing for Russia. It had good objectives, and it would bring good results. But a number of changes had to be made in how and in what way the Communists organized the economy. They were not technologically progressive enough. They were divided in their own visions of how to put things together, and they were uncertain, if I could put it this way, on the path to tread.

He had very little, I think, sense of the dis-utilities and the dis-economies that Communism, with a small group of bureaucrats making key economic decisions, which on the other side of the house were often controlled by the market and people's perception of the market, that large inefficiencies were resulting. And they, in many ways, brought about the economic collapse of the Soviet Union. It was, in that sense, as it is in the West as well these days, a struggle between how to achieve social justice on the one hand, and how to achieve maximum efficiency in the economy on the other. Efficiency does not naturally produce social justice, and social justice distorts some of the market pressures that often push entrepreneurs and capitalists in the direction of a more efficient economy.

This is a long explanation, but I think, in my view, it is a better depiction of what happened in Russia than the simple conclusions, which were widespread, popular, easy to understand, friendly to adopt, but perhaps as wrong as anything could be. And that was that there was some kind of Western world victory that came about, that in many ways destroyed Communism and made it, in a sense, a creature in their hands. And it was as a result that the West was going to take this creature and, like putty or like clay, mold something new that looked a little bit like Swiss democracy writ large, or Western European solutions to great problems, none of which was really in many ways understood or compatible with how Russians themselves and their leaders saw the issue.

Two just anecdotal comments: when I arrived in May of 1993, everyone I dealt with was a confirmed, committed Communist, put in service in the support of a Communist-elected

party. I'm sorry, Communist-elected Parliament and a Communist Party dominated government. And moving away from that was very hard for them intellectually. The second was a famous statement by a Polish economist called Adam Michnik, who once said, "Communism was tremendously effective at making fish soup out of a fishbowl, but the reverse is something that nobody understood. Making a fishbowl back out of fish soup was not a possible direction."

And so, that perhaps is more than you wanted to know in an answer to that question. But it's an attempt to describe what was in many ways the economic uncertainties, the economic worries, and the economic unpredictabilities of this move with the collapse of Communism almost overnight after Christmas of 1991, and the struggle, on the part of many, to re-erect something else that could work but would perhaps move closer to representing, as your question emphasized, the interest of the Russian people in the outcome and the need for them to be beneficiaries of it.

Hanna Notte
Thank you so much, Ambassador, for these reflections on the changes that Russia was going through in the early '90s. I now want to shift the conversation to how the United States, in particular, was dealing with that new Russian Federation. We often hear today that Russians hold a number of grievances with U.S. policy vis-à-vis their country in the early '90s, and mid-1990s in particular, from America failing to assist Russia's "soft landing" economically, to NATO eastward expansion. I'd like to ask you, generally, do you see particular inflection points during the Clinton administration, and specifically the period that you were serving in Russia, for the U.S.-Russia relationship? And by that, I really mean any events or decisions taken by either side, the U.S. or Russia, that had significant implications for the trajectory of the relationship going forward.

Ambassador Pickering
It's a very good question, and let me try to address it. Were I to do this as a matter of informed analytical reflection, I would perhaps go back over that history, the period between May of '93 and the end of November '96, and pick out a lot. But let me, on the basis of my memory, which, at my age and at this time, is far from perfect, pick out a few things. In April of 1993, before actually arriving in Russia, I was privileged to attend and sit at the large table of a meeting between President Yeltsin and President Clinton in Vancouver, in British Columbia, in Canada. The meeting was an effort to have them introduce themselves to each other, to talk about a way ahead, and to try to begin the resolution of a number of the problems that were out there.

Clinton was very considerate of President Yeltsin, but one of the most interesting things was that an idea had percolated, in large measure with the support of Strobe Talbott, who was close to the president and then occupied the unique position in the State Department of being in charge of Russia and the former Soviet Union, and was in many ways my home base contact, sender of instructions, and principal contact for things. And sitting at the table with Strobe's briefing of the president ahead of time, and the president agreeing, there was a

suggestion near the end of the meeting that President Clinton would like to appoint his vice president, Al Gore, to be his principal point of contact with Russia at the Washington level, and suggested that the Russian side also reciprocate.

Yeltsin immediately thought that he would have to appoint his vice president, with whom he was deeply at odds, to this job. It was very clear almost immediately, when you heard him begin to speak, that this conclusion was in his mind, and he was going to seek to find a way to stop the process in order not to have to appoint his vice president. Strobe got it right away, gave a note to President Clinton, and President Clinton interrupted Yeltsin and said, "This is not necessarily something where you have to match the level and job of our appointment with your own. You can choose the person you think best equipped to do the job, and I will accept that person." He immediately switched to Prime Minister Chernomyrdin.

So, we had the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission set up. And it, over a period of time, did good work. It did good work on several levels. It did good work on the cabinet-to-cabinet meetings that were represented by those within the governments of both sides, who were chosen to meet with their opposite numbers in fields like health and defense and even foreign affairs, and finance and so on, and work out the individual problems. Not all were a success. And a number of the Russian ministers were less than cooperative because they were less than enthusiastic, and, quite clearly, were less than fully understanding of what it was that we were proposing to do to try to help them, and that many of those involved with some concern on our side for not being fully aware of political obligations that those ministers were not going to undertake, or be able to undertake.

The second piece of that was perhaps more important and more productive, and that was the bilateral contact between Gore and Chernomyrdin that had to do with dealing with a number of the harder subjects and doing it on their own. One of the subjects that they were very helpful in resolving was the sale proposed by Russia to India of a third-stage space maneuvering engine for a satellite program, but which would have given India the capacity to develop multiple independently targeted reentry vehicles. That was resolved, in part because Vice President Gore and his very distinguished assistant Leon Fuerth immediately realized that the Russians were also asking for an increased number of American space launches that we could not provide out of our own system. And so, we agreed to contract for those on the basis that the contract with India would not go ahead.

We also helped to resolve some very interesting questions over Russian military equipment sales to Iran. And essentially, Russians agreed, after a short period of time, that they would terminate all the contracts that we were concerned about for tanks and armored vehicles, and for aircraft and things that would give Iran an increased military capability, something we saw at our expense, in the expense of our Gulf state Arab allies in the region. So it played an important role there. That commission was a framework for much of what happened in Yeltsin-Clinton meetings, to prepare subjects that would go to them to talk through the possibilities and options. And so, it was very instrumental.

A second important framing and, indeed, point of inflection of significance was, of course, what we have already been talking about, the outbreak of violence in the streets of Moscow around the Foreign Ministry and later the Russian White House, Mayor's office, on October 3rd of 1993, which we tracked and followed very closely. Which meant, in a sense, that Yeltsin was saying that the previous Communist-elected Parliament, elected with competing Communists for each of the seats, had done so much simply to change the constitution by majority voting, that the direction in which he wanted to take Russia and the capacity to get there were totally undermined by this set of activities.

And while prorogation of the Parliament was not in his power constitutionally, he did it extra-constitutionally, and he attempted to ameliorate that in a political sense – and we are talking politics now – by agreeing that while he prorogued the Parliament, the Congress, the Duma, after the end of September 1993, he agreed that he would hold elections for a new Parliament in January and open it up to all parties. That indeed took place, and it took place in a way that did not make Mr. Yeltsin very happy because he did not emerge with a sufficient number of seats, effectively, to govern through that new Duma. He had to contend with that for most of the rest of his political life in ways that he had hoped to avoid, and felt, in many ways, he could, by what he was doing.

A third inflection point was what I would call a rolling inflection point. The Russian people, beginning with the end of Communism in December of 1991, right through my time, for most of the time, paid a very, very high price in lacking food and other essential necessities, as well as healthcare, by the failure of the Communist system under Gorbachev and then under Yeltsin to be able to deliver those necessities. While workarounds were created, and they were interesting, they were not, in my view, satisfactory to a proud people who believed, in fact, that they had gone from perhaps the world's second largest, if not largest and most important, political power, to something on the scale of the Hungarian economy.

They saw it in the streets. The state shops, which were the only ones that existed at the beginning of this period, had nothing to offer them. Or if they had something to offer, it was – stand in line and be surprised at what you could get. So, there was suffering. Some of that was supplemented by the ability of the new government to recognize that some independent entrepreneurship had to be recognized. And so, the kiosks, which were quickly constructed, sprung up along many of the major streets without a lot of government supervision, and with quite high prices, but a way of providing basic necessities.

There was the introduction of foreign investment, of Finnish and Irish shops out of their own supermarket chains came to Moscow in very small numbers, again, at very high prices with foreign currency transactions only, to try to relieve the high-end people of some of the burden that they had. There was an immediate opening of state-owned apartments – they were all state owned – for absorption, if I could put it this way, by the people living there, as state guests in those apartments, against the payment over ten years of a very nominal fee. It began at 10,000 rubles.

And 10,000 rubles began at something like $18,000, which was not something that Russians could easily manage to scrape together. But with a very high rate of inflation, the dollar then descended to something on the order of a thousand or more rubles to buy a dollar. And so people could collect, in effect, enough rubles that deflated exchange rates, particularly if they had access to foreign currency, to pay almost a pittance for what were, on the whole, at one end, at the high end, very nice apartments, and at the other end, adequate apartments with semi-adequate facilities – often shared kitchens and bathrooms, which we knew prevailed under Communism. But, nevertheless, they became independent.

Another effort was the opening of lands outside of the major cities for the construction of gardens and associated small houses, or dachas, with them. And that led to the creation of colonies for buildings. Often, retired military, who had some money, would join in these colonies, and construct buildings. The buildings were elaborate and quite impressive, and not architecturally controlled. But the utility systems were almost nonexistent. That made, in a sense, a strange arrangement. But much of this came because it was needed or wanted, and the system allowed it to happen. But in allowing it to happen, the system was clearly unable to look at things as perhaps we might in the West: zoning requirements for building construction; provision of central sewers, water, electricity, and other services that would meet a common standard and be widely available. As a result, it was like camping out in a mega mansion in some piece of property quite remote from the center only beginning to be served by transportation.

I think, finally, there were too many Americans working in too many different angles to try to find ways to be helpful, with too little concentration of effort and too little focus on what had to be done, and very little understanding, which we all shared, of how and in what way would be the best way to modify what was being done. Within the Russian system, you had people who were, in many ways, outstanding advocates, in one sense or another, that, well, we want to recreate the beauties of Communism, but in a more liberal fashion. Or, we are now free entirely to carry out economic activities with no rules at all.

And therefore, if there are no rules, we can do things that are palpably illegal in other countries in order to make sure that our own fortunes prosper in an economic sense. We can become wealthy, and quick, and have a great deal of influence in the political sphere, which was very debilitating. But there are, and still are, people we have come to term 'oligarchs,' who, in one way or another, are dominating big pieces of the economy and participating in the corruption that they fostered and allowed in order to line their pockets, to create a sweetheart relationship with the government, whether it was Yeltsin who fought against it, or Putin, who's obviously using and manipulating it as a way to assure his continued, if I could use the expression, service to the people of Russia.

Hanna Notte

Thank you. Wow. A lot there. I want to use that statement that you made – too many Americans working in too many directions, perhaps with too little understanding – as a sort of launching pad to zoom out, Ambassador Pickering, and ask you a slightly broader question,

which is about Clinton's foreign policy more broadly. One sometimes hears this contention that President Clinton had no clear foreign policy compass overall, that perhaps he was more reactive than proactive in foreign affairs, that he was more focused on U.S. domestic concerns, and that against this backdrop, he dealt with Russia as a country which didn't count for much anymore in international affairs at that time. First of all, I want to ask you, do you think that's a fair and accurate assessment of how Clinton looked at Russia? Or how would you characterize the Clinton administration's approach vis-à-vis this new Russian Federation and how that fit in within the United States' broader national security and foreign policy objectives at the time?

Ambassador Pickering

It's a very important question, Hanna, and thank you for asking it. It's a question that brings pain to Americans who, in many ways, particularly in those days, seeing the end of the Cold War, and they left alone to make decisions in foreign policy by their lights – I think they were wrong in doing that – could freely make mistakes as rapidly as they could score winners.

Secondly, there was a clear view – my quote from Adam Michnik a few questions ago emphasized it – there was no settled set of ideas about how one could take a formerly Communist-dominated economy, and polity, and put it into the groove that would lead them to something that resembled Western Europe, northern hemisphere success in achieving how, in the liberal progressive order, states would do in this process. And even the Baltics, which had had both long experience and willing people to work hard in this popular direction, had their own difficulties and problems. And so, it was neither easy, nor was there a playbook or a set of formulas.

And so, people like Larry Summers, brilliant, emerging then through the chain of jobs he held in the Treasury to being secretary of the Treasury, worked very hard to try to build up a reliable process of American investment in Russia and American influence on Russian ideas. The Agency for International Development, formerly heavily experienced in the underdeveloped world, suddenly was given the opportunity to try to develop programs and ideas for a basket case of an economy that spread widely over all kinds of elements of success and failure.

Huge technological innovation possibilities in Russia. Indeed, many tried to persuade Russians to seek foreign investment in their continued R&D efforts as a way to take the lines of inquiry formerly sponsored under the Communist regime, often by the defense establishment in Russia, of various new ideas and outlooks and develop products and services, often, again, for the utilitarian purpose of supporting the defense of the Soviet Union, but often capable of being applied to the civilian structure as something that was useful. And they did this in biology and, unfortunately, in the course of doing so, failed to keep their commitments under the biology convention [Biological Weapons Convention] about not creating warlike substances which could be used for biological attack, in part because the biological convention was then unable to formulate any measures of inspection and control, which would give reliance other than assurances mutually that people were obeying its strictures about developing or not developing biological agents of warfare. So there was much out there

that, in many ways, contributed to the confusing welter of uncertain prospects about how to go.

The Clinton foreign policy, to touch on that aspect of your question, like almost all American presidents, were not going to negate American attention to domestic issues at their own peril with respect to future elections. American electoral processes are dominated by high attention to and, indeed, great dependence upon the contending parties being able to provide to the electors in the United States, the people who vote, convincing arguments about what they were going to do about handling the number of outstanding and important political domestic issues and economic domestic issues that were part and parcel of the responsibility, as people saw it, of governance in the United States.

And as a result, they, perhaps, could then diminish, or take unnecessarily, time and attention away from looking at these foreign affairs questions, which you identified, which I think were all important, and which were taxing America in more ways than I think we were comfortable with, but about which we had no capacity to avoid considering. As a result, that led to competition and confusion, a lack of what one would have called in physics a unified field theory of how to go about helping Russia and the other states of the former Soviet Union emerge from Communism of the early 1990s, which was failing economically, into something a great deal more prosperous and effective, and hopefully politically kinder to electorate attitudes and votes.

Hanna Notte

Ambassador Pickering, thank you for that. I would like to turn the conversation now to what's considered one of the elephants in the room when we discuss the trajectory of the U.S.-Russia relationship over the decades, and that is the question of NATO expansion. I recall that you mentioned in the first interview in this Ambassadorial Series with Jill that you felt U.S. officials were indeed making an effort in the 1990s to make the case to Russia, not only that NATO was no longer a threat to Russia, but perhaps even holding out the hope that one day Russia might wish to join the alliance, become part of NATO. I want to ask you, if these efforts were candid, why do you think they failed to resonate more with Russian counterparts in Moscow?

Ambassador Pickering

It's a very good question. I'd like to begin with a story that will illustrate, I think, some of the factors that played the role, and then, perhaps, explain it a little bit further. After retiring from the State Department, I spent a lot of my time in traveling around the country speaking about Russia. I still do to some extent today, as an extension of that. And very often, the second or third question that I would get from American audiences speaking about Russia would begin, "The Soviet Union has just done this." The attachment to the notion of the Soviet Union, despite its demise years before, and its nonexistence, was still very strong and colored American views in ways that even the best of all information efforts would not have in any way effaced. But there was no such effort to deal with it.

The opposite number on the Russian side was equally strange but disastrous, which was that the steady drumbeat of anti-NATO propaganda, ideas, stories, explanations, and efforts, was a central part, long past the demise of Communism, of how and in what way the government, in fact, informed the Russian people about its views, and particularly when NATO enlargement became the problem. NATO was the common enemy. NATO was surrounding Russia. NATO was about to take over if they could. NATO was the obligation to use military force. NATO was unprovoked by Russia – not necessarily true, but that was their view – and the Warsaw Pact had to be created to stop it, and it was bad for Russia.

And so, that history on both sides, the enthusiasm of the Americans for continuing to look at Russia as if it were the Soviet Union, and the enthusiasm of Russia for accepting NATO – as clearly presented by the Kremlin – as an unadulterated, powerful enemy seeking to work its way on Russia and Russian policy, created what was then, without doubt, a great popular enthusiasm for the enlargement on the United States and the Western European side, and great popular opposition to this enlargement as something that presented a continuing and increased serious danger to Russia.

Those questions were in many ways buttressed by additional facts. Had James Baker promised not to deploy American nuclear weapons east of the Oder-Neisse Line or east of the former boundary of East-West Germany? Had the United States committed not to deploy forces into that area under NATO, and did it keep those commitments? Had Russia, in one way or another, accepted, under President Yeltsin, the expansion, but allowed the festering of popular opinion to torment the expansion so widely and so popularly as to have created an effectively new policy commitment in Russia against NATO enlargement as a highly dangerous, highly threatening affair?

You mentioned the notion, and I think it was an important part of the lamented late effort to convince the Russians that if NATO wasn't exactly good for it, it was not the abject enemy that the Russians described it as. And one of those was to keep the door open for Russian membership in NATO. It was never accepted, but in the early days, it was not totally rejected. And that allowed the U.S. to keep the door open without having to fear the consequences of what would happen were Russia to join NATO. Because Russian membership in NATO would have been a strong negative addition to NATO for people like the Poles, who, in many ways, saw their joining NATO as an absolute guarantee under Article 5 that no Russian military force would ever be used against Poland in any way to promote Russian interests at the expense of Poland. This was true of a number of East European countries, not peculiarly the Poles. But the Poles were perhaps in the forefront of this, given their long and different history, if I can be diplomatic at this point, with Russia.

And so, that's out there. It remains. It hasn't in any way improved. It is very clear that since 2000, and perhaps even before that, President Putin has maintained his popularity and leadership in Russia, which has not been increasing, but it hasn't declined to the point where he's lost anything. Certainly, the election a few days ago indicated either a continued large capacity to affect Russian electoral outcomes on the part of the Kremlin and him, or a

continued sufficiency of popularity to assure that he doesn't have to do that even if it's declining.

And so, the idea that Putin's pursuing a nationalist policy to continue to enhance his reputation among Russians is, in my view, an analytical factor that cannot be dismissed in terms of the relationship between the states. And, if one had to say, here are American presidents that I just said are tremendously wrapped up in domestic issues and resolving domestic problems for electoral purposes, and here is President Putin, tremendously wrapped up in nationalist issues, for a principal purpose of staying in power, the differences may be in degree. The differences may be institutional: in America, we limit our presidents to two terms; in Russia, they have the opportunity, with changes to the constitution and the present setup, to promote and have adopted, perhaps even popularly adopted, extended terms for President Putin in the Russian electoral system. So, from one set of measures to another set of measures, there are interlinkages and interrelationships that one cannot ignore.

It would be a mistake for me as a former American ambassador, devoted as much as I possibly could in my life to speaking truth to where I found it, regardless of the cost, and there were times when I knew it was best to save that truth for a later time, if I can put it that way. And I don't admit of absolute suicidal heroism as a primary determinant of my foreign policy advice. But there were times when we all had to say what it was we thought about questions. And, to some extent, we have, and should admit that we were not the best at helping Russia move from Communism to something else. And that left the door open for Russians to seek their own solution. And that much of what we did set the groundwork for Mr. Putin's continued popularity in Russia over the years, with its ups and downs, after Yeltsin, and supported Yeltsin as well.

Yeltsin, in my humble view – a final statement in response to this question, which is a bit far afield – in almost every decision he had that made a big consequence for the future of the country, made a decision that I think was defensible in the view of preserving democracy and some new openness. He made many smaller decisions that were less so. The one big error, in my view, was the 1996 war in Chechnya – the pre-1996 war in Chechnya – in part because he became convinced that a good war is always good for presidential reelection.

Hanna Notte

Thank you, Ambassador Pickering. A lot of interesting moments here. The war in Chechnya, the difference between the American and the Russian polity, these are elements to which we will return in later questions. For the moment, I want to stick with the question of NATO expansion – for one moment. You shared your views of the apprehensions on the Russian side in the 1990s, the way that Russians were looking at that major expansion. And I want to ask you, I know that you telegraphed your sense of those Russian concerns back to Washington from Moscow at the time. And indeed, you were not alone. George Kennan warned at that time that enhancing NATO in the proposed manner would, quote unquote, "be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era."

I'd like to ask you, why were those kinds of warnings not heeded more in Washington? I mean, did this have to do with U.S. domestic politics at the time? You were mentioning earlier that NATO expansion was popular in the West. Was it about domestic politics, or was it purely conviction in the sense that the White House, perhaps President Clinton personally, simply felt that NATO expansion was the right thing to do? So if you could speak a little bit to the push and pull factors on that issue, NATO expansion in Washington, that would be most helpful.

Ambassador Pickering
I think NATO expansion had a core of very effective advocates, that much of it was popular in domestic political terms, as you've touched on in your question, among Polish Americans, Ukrainian Americans, Lithuanian Americans, who saw this as the willingness of the United States to step up and protect those countries, which had been absorbed after 1945 in the Soviet sphere and had become, in a sense, colonies of the Soviet Union. And that that should never be repeated, and we had a way of putting in place a guarantee. And that guarantee was NATO enlargement. Of course, the Russians saw this as a deep and directed argument against their interests in Eastern Europe. We differed clearly on it. But it was also clear that the Russian view was that the Eastern European region, as well as Central Asia and the Caucasus, were what would be termed, I suppose, natural spheres of influence of Russia. And we were fighting over that, and NATO enlargement was a contest over it.

It was popular in the United States because it had voter significance. It was popular in the United States because these people had suffered, come out from under what we saw as the Communist yoke, were now free and independent, electing their own governments, and they should have full support to go down the path that looked more like Western Europe than it did Warsaw Pact. And we were very much committed, and that was very popular in the United States. The Russian view was that this is a danger, and America's intruding in our space, that we, over a long period of time, had the right to protect ourselves against that kind of nefarious influence, that the post-World War II settlement was put together in our interests to keep us from having to suffer those consequences, and now it was all being undone.

And I don't know whether that helps or not, but that was the root cause of much of the differences. And the point you make, without having expressed it that way, was what is fair? What is equitable? What is democratic? What supports open market activity? What supports capitalist-based economic growth in that part of the world? And one would have to say the notion of NATO enlargement could be portrayed, particularly for those who favored it, as entirely in keeping with those objectives.

My own view at the time was that I had a duty as an ambassador to warn Washington about the impact on Russia. That warning was carefully put together with the help of a wonderful staff. Copies of at least one of those warning cables is in Bill Burns's recent book, so you could read it for yourself. At the same time, I had little expectation, given what I knew about the bulldozer and steamroller pushing this particular direction, that we would change in any way along the lines that our warning raised the problem that there was a halfway house that

emerged after NATO enlargement – a suggestion by the then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Shalikashvili, that we could create a Partnership for Peace with, not beginning with full membership in NATO, but working particularly with military coordination, peacekeeping operations, areas of common interest with the East Europeans, but include Russia from the beginning, which we did. And there was Russian interest, and the then commander of NATO went out of his way to do what he could to incorporate the Russian generals assigned to liaison with NATO, a role in understanding NATO thinking.

I think there was something that we could have done, which was a much earlier effort to adopt an idea that emerged after NATO enlargement became effectively put in place, and that was the Partnership for Peace. General John Shalikashvili, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, pushed for it and sold it, and it was to bring in both NATO partners and potential future NATO partners, including Russia, into a cooperative arrangement built around how and in what way their, particularly, military forces would engage in international peacekeeping, would be ready to help in times of emergency by cooperating together in places like the Balkans and so on, as later happened, in order to prevent misunderstandings that were certainly clearly self-evident in the differences over NATO enlargement.

And I think it was too bad that, in effect, we didn't begin with the Partnership for Peace and then later slowly have that emerge into NATO membership in a way that could have involved people who were part and parcel of that cooperation and broader understanding. And a then supreme allied commander went particularly out of his way to assure that the Russian generals who represented the Russian Armed Forces in Brussels before NATO were as involved as he could make them, and had access to him and could talk to them in a short period of time, but a useful period of time, in trying to build up what was, I think, an instrumental and procedural counterpoint, if I could put it this way, to the negative Russian attitudes that emerged quite quickly over NATO enlargement.

Hanna Notte
Thank you, Ambassador, for those additional remarks on the NATO question. I want to shift the conversation to Chechnya now, if I may. Your service in Moscow coincided with the outbreak of the first Chechen War. First of all, I'm just curious, how did you ensure, you and your staff at the embassy at the time, that you would receive accurate, objective, timely information on what was actually going on, on the ground? And then, once you had that information, how did you formulate your advice on the Chechnya issue for Washington? I mean, was there even interest in Washington in Russia's predicament at that time? Or was Chechnya really marginal for U.S. policymakers?

Ambassador Pickering
It was not marginal for me, but it was clearly much more marginal in Washington. Over the period of time, because we had consular issues in Chechnya, I asked, and one or two of our consular officers went there to reside, to work on the consular issues but provide us with firsthand accounts of what they were seeing and hearing and doing. And that helped to expand our base of understanding. It was also possible for me to be in touch with the local

governor of a neighboring republic of Chechnya, who had had very extensive Soviet military experience, but was then retired but acting as governor. I worked with him. He worked, in an effort to try to be helpful to us, to find missing Americans who had disappeared during humanitarian work in Chechnya. Among them perhaps most famous and important was Fred Cuny, who was an independent operator, a man of great capacity and distinction, who was not afraid to go into dangerous areas, and undoubtedly lost his life as a result of that.

We were also able to stay in touch with the OSCE, which at various times provided support and assistance for peacekeeping and peace negotiations in Chechnya. And that helped. And then we had our usual contacts in Moscow, with the Russian side of the equation, that gave us a clearer view of how they were thinking and working to deal with the problem of Chechnya.

One of the most difficult and unmanageable parts of the problem was the Russian invasion of Grozny, where Russian armored forces lined up and went down the main street and were attacked by the Chechen insurgents from the basements of nearby houses with captured anti-tank weapons, and left a trail of devastation and a very important defeat.

Russia attempted to reverse this with the use of special heavy artillery attacks against Grozny and did a lot of destruction. It meant, at the end of the first Chechen War, Russia had little to point to in a way of success. A number of individuals, including the oligarch Berezovsky, played some role in facilitating negotiations to end the conflict at that stage. And while it picked up again some years later and another round was fought, Yeltsin was able to get it off the agenda, if I could put it this way, and out of the way enough to succeed in the next round of presidential elections.

Hanna Notte
Thank you for that. I do want to ask a follow-up question on this first Chechen War, which is slightly broader and conceptual in nature, if I may. It seems to me that Russia's experience in the 1990s, with war and instability in the North Caucasus, generated this fear of centrifugal tendencies, fragmentation, a sense that there would be instability at the periphery unless there is a strong central state in Moscow. And it appears to me that all this has, to some extent, informed the Russian leadership's view on how you maintain or ensure societal stability ever since, whether it is in domestic affairs, in Russia itself, but we also see it in Russia's foreign policy to some extent, if we look, for instance, at how Russia has dealt with Syria. I'm just curious how you reflect on those questions and on the conclusions that the Russian leadership appears to have drawn from the first and second Chechen Wars. And I also want to ask you whether you think there's sufficient understanding of these Russian lessons learned in Washington.

Ambassador Pickering
You make a very good point, and I would take it back further. I think the question of sufficient understanding has to be also complimented by the question, is there sufficient attention given to it? Understanding precedes attention, and the understanding is larger than the attention. Let me, however, go back and walk this question forward a little bit. There's no question at all

that large numbers of Russians were extremely disappointed by the decision made the day after Christmas in 1991, in a sense to free up the constituent republics of the former Soviet Union and allow them each to proceed to independence.

And certainly, the continued problems over Ukraine are only one example of this deep question. In addition, when I was there before Chechnya became a problem, there were serious concerns that there had been traditionally in the Soviet Union, that the Far East somehow was going to pull away and operate itself in a more independent status. There was concern about the border republics of the Russian Federation, of which there are 22, who have the special status of republic. They have an anthem. They have a flag. They don't in any way have significant political authorities, but Stalin did this as a way to try to honor their sense of their differences. They're often linguistically different areas. There are a significant number in the North Caucasus, and there are others scattered around, including in Siberia. These worried the Russians.

I was there at the time that Yeltsin took a trip on the Volga River and met with Governor Shaimiev of Tatarstan. Tatarstan is a Muslim area right in the center of the Volga region, right in the center of the center of Russia. Yeltsin treated Shaimiev with a degree of independence that went beyond what, perhaps, most Russians were prepared to accord as a way of trying to satisfy him that the issues that he was concerned about would be dealt with in a careful way and in a considerate way by the Russian state. That meant that it became the pattern for the maximum that a Russian region could achieve within the Russian Federation of independent operation and reflected very much this view that Russians were deeply concerned by vociferousness, by the ability, the status, the capability of a disintegration, of its constituent units and to more independent acting arrangements.

And this played a role in Mr. Putin's ascent to power. Shortly after 2000, when he began to introduce ideas, he did two things that in many ways militated against this independence going too far. One of those was to provide that the elected governors of the Russian oblasts, the standard, if I could put it this way, provincial subdivisions of the Russian state, should no longer be elected but appointed by the central government. And this was in large measure to cut into the development that had taken place in the Yeltsin years and early Putin years. These local oblasts had created, in a sense, many economies of their own, in many ways, directed and operated by the governors. And the governors achieved a status inside the Russian Federation which, while not threatening Putin's leadership, he could see on the horizon is coming in that direction.

And the second thing he did is, he went back to a tsarist enterprise of governors general and, I think, appointed eight in major regions of Russia, who would, in one sense or another, make sure that the provinces under their control, mainly oblasts, would toe the line and be part of how and in what way the federal central government wanted to see things. These two steps were seen by many as anti-democratic, by many as further centralizing, but were popular among many Russians who feared the breakup and who thought that nothing could be worse for Russia than the recreation of the civil war of the '20s and how disastrous it was for Russia,

for Russian life and for Russian economics. And so, there is, across the spectrum in Russia, that problem.

When Russian tanks went on the bridge over the Moscow River and fired at the Russian White House on October 3rd of 1993, the first thing that popped into my mind was: are we going to have a civil war in Russia? And is it going to be as disastrous for the country as the civil war between the Reds and the Whites was after the end of the First World War and the beginning of the Communist state? I had a worry about that, that I don't think was misplaced. It was something that we all thought of as being a very damaging situation. We did what we could, in whatever ways that we could, to encourage Yeltsin and his advisors to be very careful of venturing too far down the road in that direction. And that's another reason why the elections of January 1994, which, as I noted, had not turned out the way Yeltsin had hoped they would, were helpful in taking some of the pressure off, as well as the new constitution drafted shortly thereafter by Yeltsin, which provided a stronger presidency and a stronger central government and a stronger role for Yeltsin himself in the future governance of the state, was important.

Hanna Notte
Thank you, Ambassador Pickering, for such a comprehensive answer. I do want to shift to a different episode in your distinguished diplomatic career. Ambassador, you were at the United Nations representing the United States from 1989 until 1992. Of course, Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 provided a real test of the U.S. and then still Soviet relationship under Gorbachev, if we consider that Saddam's Iraq had been a longstanding Soviet ally. But, nonetheless, it turned out that Gorbachev instructed the Soviet ambassador at the United Nations to vote in support of the U.S. in condemning the invasion of Kuwait. But then the Soviets also supported the legal basis at the UN Security Council for what became the first Gulf War of 1991. I would like to ask you, could you share some insights, some anecdotes from your interactions with Soviet counterparts on that issue at the time? What were their apprehensions? What was their thinking? Why did the Soviets decide to support the United States in this instance? How did they look at the first Gulf War?

Ambassador Pickering
It was very interesting because my service in Russia came after that, although I had spent, prior to the UN days, a significant amount of time in arms controls negotiations with the Russians. So, I understood some of the motivations, but not the complete panoply of motivations. But a number of things happened that were interesting. One was that the Russians withdrew, in the late spring of 1990, at the end of his term, the then Soviet ambassador to the United Nations, who was a very strong, very committed, very hard-line Soviet Communist, and left in charge his deputy, who was Ukrainian by nationality or in origin, and who was in many ways much more flexible in where things should go.

At the same time, as the war broke out in early August, in the Middle East, with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, there was, in the development of approaches here, a growing relationship both between George H.W. Bush and Gorbachev, one that it was hard for Bush to abandon

when Gorbachev left the scene and Yeltsin appeared, and a very important relationship between Secretary Baker and Foreign Minister Shevardnadze. And at the top, particularly on questions like the use of force resolution at the end of November 1990, which was the authority for American and other military participation in driving Iraqi forces out of Kuwait, beginning in January 17th, 1991, but ending in April, with a long air campaign and a very short military ground force campaign, the Russians were supportive.

I could remember one particularly difficult time at the end of November. I was president of the Security Council, and the Israelis had just had a big dustup on the Temple Mount. Arik Sharon [Yitzak Shamir] was, I think, running Israeli politics at the time, and because Palestinians had thrown stones over the Western Wall, on Jews praying at the site, Israeli policemen invaded the top of the Temple Mount and, in the course of dealing with those Palestinians, killed a number of Palestinians. This was an answer to Saddam's prayers because he felt that if he could say, "My invasion of Kuwait was only the first step on the road to liberate Jerusalem," he could somehow create and attract more Arab support than he had at that time.

And the Israeli actions and toughness did not sit well with a number of members of the Security Council. One Monday morning, after a long and difficult weekend, as president of the Security Council – and my total effort was, just weeks away from the use of force resolution, not to allow this other issue to intrude on the constant and laser-like focus of the Security Council, which we supported as a political asset of great significance to us, to be wasted away by what was going on in the Middle East.

I had no basis for canvassing for much support early on Monday morning other than what we had done, so we went cold into the meeting. My conclusion was that this is going to be make or break, and the chances are not on my side. But I'm going to give a talk to indicate how much we have all jointly invested in dealing with Iraq, how close we are now, both to the failure of sanctions, to achieve that objective, and the necessity that we take the next step up, which was the palpable threat of the use of military force. We knew by then that the resolution was going to contain a delay from the end of November to mid-January before any force could be used, and maybe negotiations could ensue. So, I made my speech to the Security Council. I said, "I'm your president. My decision as president is to wait and not consider the Israeli problem on the Temple Mount until we have more clarity about what happened and who did what to whom. And that may take several weeks. But we ought to be prepared, in light of everything we've invested and done together on dealing with Iraq, to do that."

And the first individual who asked to speak was Yuli Vorontsov, who had just arrived within weeks and had been ambassador in the United States when I was ambassador in Russia, and had been ambassador in India preceding my service in India. We knew each other, but not very well. Yuli, for reasons I could never fathom, stood up and said, in the Security Council informal meeting, "We in Russia support that view. We will join with the Americans and with the rest of you in considering the Israeli problem at the appropriate time. But it is not now." And that solved the problem for me, just out of the blue. I had no reason to suggest to him that that would be the appropriate course of action, because I had very little confidence that it

would be. But it was, and it did, and it made a big difference in how capably we could then deal with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

And all that followed is history. But it had an important role in the effort of Saddam, and perhaps others, to sidetrack the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and overthrow where the Security Council had come. And, without putting too fine a point on it, I had thought that the Security Council had acted in the two months and three months leading up to the use of force resolution precisely as the drafters of the UN charter had thought it should act. And it was an unusual circumstance and well worth considering as an important precedent, as well as a significant action to deal with a total violation of international peace and security with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

Hanna Notte
Ambassador, thank you for those fascinating anecdotes, telling us about that meeting, that important informal meeting at the UN Security Council. I realize I'm asking a big question here, but if you could offer some reflections on why Russia, Russian diplomats, were reacting so differently as the United States was gearing up for the first Gulf War, compared to the second Gulf War, a decade or a bit more later.

Ambassador Pickering
I think, interestingly enough, Russia, and the Soviet Union, at the time, paid a great deal of attention to international law, particularly when it supported their point of view, or particularly when ignoring international law or operating to a different standard of behavior would have set precedents which were not in its long-term interest. And Russia was worried, as we were in our own way, about war breaking out over some pretense that would in one way or another end up with one country invading another. And so, cross-border invasions, in an aggressive sense, were no-no's under international law, and they should be dealt with. It didn't always happen that that was the case, and it didn't always happen that Russian interests were aligned with its view of international law to the extent that was the case. Russian diplomats, in my humble view, did not operate on their own. They operated in accordance with set policies, and the set policies were decisions taken at the top in Russia. One cannot help but understand that both Mister Gorbachev and Mister Shevardnadze had a common view of this situation and were prepared to be supportive.

The next question had to do, obviously, with Russian-American relations. Would having turned their back on us after spending a great deal of time speaking with them and talking about the importance we attach to the next step here, and how valuable it would be in calming an otherwise very disruptive Middle East, and that would be in their interests as well as ours, I think played a significant role in how they saw this. They didn't vote with us 'yes' on every resolution. But they eschewed the notion of vetoing resolutions and would abstain at times rather than leave the consensus. And on the use of force, that's what they did, as China did.

And those particular efforts were very much appreciated by the United States, and we attempted to, obviously, keep them well-informed. But it was, in the end, in my view, the high-

level contact between George H.W. Bush and Gorbachev, and Secretary Baker's unstinting efforts to meet with every foreign minister of every member of the Security Council and personally to do everything he could to assure that, one, they wouldn't vote against us, and secondly, those who had the veto would not use the veto, even if he couldn't persuade them to vote for us, but he hoped that he could do that. And he was quite successful in doing it. And his last meeting was in New York two days before the vote, and we together –I joined him – met with the Cuban foreign minister, who was not movable.

PART 2

Hanna Notte
Ambassador Pickering, I would like to turn the conversation to an important policy field in U.S.-Russia relations over time, and that is the field of arms control and nonproliferation. Now, it appears to me that after some initial progress on arms control in the early 1990s, with the START treaties, the Lisbon Protocol, or the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, the PNIs, somehow momentum on arms control was then lost during the Clinton administration. For example, there was no agreement negotiated on non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe to build on the PNIs. So, why was that? Why was there not more momentum? And perhaps – you were in Moscow from '93 to '96 – what was your sense of Russia's appetite at the time to do more arms control with the Americans?

Ambassador Pickering
Hanna, it's a great question, and I think my immediate reaction was that there were too many competing other problems of dissonance that allowed the parties to leave arms control a little bit behind in terms of how to move forward. After all, Russia and Yeltsin were struggling for control of the country. It was not a united enterprise by any means. The United States had an interest in it, but it is quite possible, in the Clinton Administration, that the opportunity that appeared on the horizon that can best be epitomized by the overstatement that having an opportunity to make a Swiss democracy out of Russia was an attractive, and indeed fetching, set of circumstances to absorb American attention. And as a result, the relationship with the former Soviet Union, with the new Russia, became a struggle in many quarters rather than highly isolated and focused mainly, but not exclusively, on arms control, and I think that had a role.

I think we were approaching a period of pre-polarization in American activities, and you know as well as I know that the horrendous problem of getting the Senate to agree, with a significant number from both parties to meet the stringent requirements of two-thirds vote for advice and consent to ratification of an agreement, was clearly imperiled by this polarization question that came along. And there were Republicans who had fantastic ideas – I can only call them fantastic because they were unreal, unsupported, unfactual, and certainly, uncooperative and uneasy – that informed or misinformed their judgment about what they should do. And it was that collection of circumstances, perhaps, that played something of a role. It may have been, too, a semi-source of satisfaction, if I can put it that way, that enough

things had been cobbled together in the better period to stand us in substantially reasonably good stead over the period of adjusting to the post-Communist situation in Russia.

Hanna Notte
Thank you for that. And perhaps I could zoom out a little bit and ask you a broader question on arms control and nonproliferation. You are someone who has worked passionately to further the cause of nonproliferation, of arms control really over decades, even since leaving office and in various Track 1.5 or Track 2 capacities. And I do want to ask you, in the absence of a cataclysmic event, a real wake up call, like, God forbid, the type of a Chernobyl disaster of 1986, how can we reignite today, at the highest leadership level in our various countries, commitment to arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation, really beyond the level of commitment that we're presently seeing, generate the kinds of pressures that we do now see on climate change, for instance, at least among certain constituencies?

Ambassador Pickering
Climate change is not the perfect example, but in some cases, one would consider it now moving ahead in a forward direction more readily than arms control. My answer to your question really falls into three particular baskets. Number one, and most important, we saw with the continuation of New START that there was not a total lack of interest on the part of either Russia and its leader, or the United States and its new leader, to move ahead. We had been through a period, rather devastating, of – unfortunately – Republican leads in tearing down the structure that had been built up over a period of time, with the ABM Treaty, with Open Skies, with INF, with a number of issues, including non-observance of things like incidents at sea and so on, that really spelled, in my view, increasing and creeping danger.

And I think there is a deep feeling on the part of leaders in both countries that tearing up the final piece – Rose Gottemoeller's and Mr. Andropov's [Antonov's] close work together in putting together New START – would have opened the door even more to accident miscalculation and the horrors that might stem from that – the things that informed us both during the Cold War. And it was represented at the Geneva summit in June by the agreement to begin again strategic stability talks; to use that as a basis, perhaps, for returning the ambassadors; to open the door to other conversations that might ensue from that, and for the reissuance of the statement that had been issued by Reagan and Gorbachev, that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. And this means that there is, without putting too fine a point on it, some tilt at the top in the direction of the next stage, and the next stage will not be easy. It can be based very strongly on the monitoring, control and verification arrangements, which have been patiently worked out in a great deal of detail in New START, as a basis for finding ways to assure the next stage can be adequately controlled.

The second part of the next stage is perhaps the suggestion made by the Obama Administration that a thousand or 900 deliverable nuclear weapons may be the right ballpark for the Strategic Force. The third will be the useful and helpful suggestions of a number of... including my old friend and colleague Steven Pifer, that we look at tactical nuclear weapons, and one of the questions we might provide for is the freedom to mix: you could have a total of

X weapons; if you wish to have some of those tactical and some of those strategic, that's your choice. The final piece, and it's not the final piece, but the final piece in my exposition is that moving down from the 5- and 6,000 weapons currently held by the powers, down – I hasten to add – from 70,000 at the height of the Cold War, perhaps, on to something that aligns the deliverable weapons much more clearly with the number of reserved weapons and the number of weapons under dismantlement at a much lower level, would in itself be, I think, a useful step.

And finally, finally, the association of Britain, France and China with those negotiations; I think it's too early to try to pull them in. But one of the things I've always thought made a lot of sense was that Russia and the United States would undertake – if they didn't want to do so collectively, individually – frequently to brief China, Britain and France on their vision of where those negotiations were going and how they might end, intimately involving them, or more intimately involving them, in the back and forth of the negotiations and the problems that had been gauged, so that they would have some of the background and some of the knowledge and some of the thoughts and ideas about how to solve those problems.

The second set of questions is also extremely important, and that is the crying out need now, which I hope will be fulfilled, for a number of Track 2 dialogues between Russia and the United States. The NATO-Russian effort started by Sergei Rogov and Aleksei Gromyko which we've just been in touch with, you and I, would be a perfect example of how to evolve further bilateral conversations. And indeed, Sergei Rogov has played an unusual and creative, constructive role in arranging for the same over the past five or ten years, from time to time in Moscow, and these are significant and important.

And then I think, finally, there is, in the public kin, across the world, still a significant sense of concern that without careful management and without further work, the retrograde progress that has been made in the last ten years will become the dominant ethic in how things are done. And unfortunately, in the Trump-Putin era, we saw individuals at the top level, including those two individuals, speak about nuclear weapons as if they were just a larger form of hand grenade and could be engaged in with impunity, and that it was perfectly alright to threaten somebody else with nuclear use, and that that contributed to better things for the individual country and America First or Russian First objectives, all of which I think were dangerous, thoughtless, and needed to be corrected. And let's be hopeful that Biden and Putin can do so.

The first meetings around the question of strategic stability have not been breathtakingly successful. They have not been, in my view, totally without profit, and they have done the minimum, which is to lead on to further meetings, but more work and more effort can be put into those. The current posture of each country seeking to avoid doing anything that in any way at all enhances the position of the other country, and that includes closer relationships between them, is not the best cloud to have hanging over the strategic stability talks. And let us hope that creative work can turn that around, that that can lead to engagement on what would only happily be called New New START and that New New START can begin to pick up the pieces that I have set out in the first part of my answer to your question.

Hanna Notte
Thank you very much for that, Ambassador Pickering. I'd like to turn the conversation to culture. You served as U.S. ambassador not only to Russia, but also to India, Israel, El Salvador, and Nigeria, countries with very different cultures, histories, social norms, concepts of honor and prestige, and related notions. Could you reflect for us a little bit on the importance to diplomatic service of understanding culture in the country that you serve to foster empathy and understanding with your interlocutors? And perhaps share some anecdotes from your own diplomatic career that serve to illustrate this.

Ambassador Pickering
Thank you. It's an interesting question; you could add Jordan and the United Nations to that list. The United Nations is not without culture; indeed, it has 193 cultures. I found culture fantastically important and extremely interesting. I spent a great deal of my time in Jordan and in Israel, following, learning about, exploring, and indeed, visiting the archaeology of the region. I emerged as a historian with my undergraduate degree and never have put aside history as an interest of mine. I enjoy music, I enjoy dance. Russia was particularly rich in understanding that. The literature of all of these countries was very interesting. Wole Soyinka, among others in Nigeria, had begun to emerge as a famous author of renown, and reading what he was writing, as well as others of his counterparts, both in Nigeria and across Africa, opened the door a great deal to my interests.

I had the wonderful opportunity of spending four months in Washington studying the Swahili language before I went to Zanzibar, and then to Dar es Salaam. And the course was rich and very, very interesting and led by an especially gifted linguist who taught us in the first two weeks, without any knowledge of a single word in Swahili, the ten most difficult adaptations an English speaker must have to be able to manage the language. And I used it, in Zanzibar in particular, for all of my diplomatic work, because the then Revolutionary Council had only one English speaker, and he was not at the top of the Council.

I found travel, which is an amazing preoccupation for anybody, but it certainly hardened my interest, if I could put it this way, in culture writ large. And I made a number of long trips. When I was in Nigeria, it took a year of planning, but I and a small group of people drove from Lagos to Algiers, across the Sahara and back, and much of what we saw and paid attention to was of archeological and historical importance. And so, in the middle of the Sahara, we visited petroglyphs, which are drawn by humans, but many hundreds and thousands of years ago showed savanna grasslands, elephants and giraffes.

We found wonderful carvings in rock, in serious bas-relief, of cattle heads with long horns like the East African Ankola cattle. And so, this was, in many ways, a delight, and one had only to open one's eyes to appreciate the architecture around the world. India was an enormous resource, and I had two great trips in India in the short ten months I was there, one mainly in Rajasthan, and the other in South India, viewing and seeing much of what informed me about the historical background of people from those regions. So that's a brief canter over a very complex course, but a very interesting one. And it was much that the U.S. did in the field of

American culture, bringing dance from America – with a newly formed, Black American troop – to Tanzania was an amazing illustration of how the interest in Alvin Ailey, who ran that troop, not just in showing the best of what he could do for modern American dance, but going to the villages around Dar es Salaam, in Tanzania, and getting them to dance for and with him; to learn what they did and how they performed, and what they had to contribute, was extremely interesting.

I learned much about Islam because I spent most of my time in the early days in the Islamic world and more by accident than by plan. But nevertheless, that was significant and important. So, let me leave my answer there, but thank you for a question that is close to my heart, and thank you for pointing out that ambassadors are more than postmen. They are people who have a very avid intellectual life, and enriching that intellectual life while you are overseas is both a challenge and a huge reward.

Hanna Notte
Thank you, Ambassador. Thank you also for sharing these anecdotes of your travel with us, and it seems to me that you've seen some amazing places throughout your career. Building on that, I want to ask you, you have dealt with Russia in very different capacities throughout your distinguished career serving the U.S. government. I mean, you were U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, so you dealt with Soviet and then Russian counterparts there. Then you were ambassador to Russia. And then, I assume that as under secretary of state for political affairs, you also had a fair share of dealing with Russia-related issues, and then subsequently in many Track 1.5 and Track 2 activities. So, you've really had the opportunity to formulate Russia policy from very different vantage points. And I'd like to ask you what your takeaways are from engaging with Russia from these different positions in the U.S. government? Did specific positions highlight specific opportunities or constraints when it comes to dealing with Russia, and did any of these positions afford you specific learning opportunities on how one best engages with Russia?

Ambassador Pickering
I did, and I think, Hanna, without putting too fine a point on it, I learned very much to like Russians. They're in many ways like Americans. And while we had serious differences, particularly with Russians in the Soviet Union – and their diplomats were super competent, knew their briefs very well, pointed out all the areas where they found differences with the United States and where they could pick apart those differences and exploit them. And we were always put on our most careful approach to questions with them.

But, over a period of time, particularly in my time of service in Russia... When I began, everybody had been, in one way or another, a serious and loyal servant of the Communist state, the Soviet Union. And in 1993, they were still in positions of importance and power, and much of what they knew was not going to be washed out of their brain cages by any changing circumstances. And to make an impression, we had to prove that we were right. And we had to do our best to show that we were open to change as well, and that this was not a re-fighting of the Cold War in a new guise, and that took a great deal of time, and it didn't succeed

everywhere, either with Americans or with Russians. But I had a number of particularly fine interlocutors. I won't mention their names because they deserve the anonymity they had when we spoke together on many occasions in Moscow. But one of the values of that set of relationships was that I could meet with a senior official, that we could in some occasions when it was useful, retire to a separate room, the two of us together, to work together on the solution to a particularly difficult problem; that often my Russian colleague would want to hear what my proposal was first, that was okay, I didn't mind it. I think the hand that holds the pen sometimes has an advantage.

But I wanted very much to provoke a reaction from my Russian colleague under those circumstances, and hopefully that reaction would open the door to how I could adjust, and he could adjust, our proposals and thoughts and ideas to bring things closer together. And that would always result in what I consider to be some of my useful telegrams written back to Washington saying, I met with so and so today; we agreed to talk one on one. We agreed that the following problem needed more attention, was not in good shape. The suggestions that came out from me were the following, from him – the following. The result was we modified in the following directions, and hopefully this is something you can work with, and let me know that we can carry on the dialogue and see if we could come to some useful conclusion. Didn't always work, but it worked often enough for me to have a kind of satisfaction with that relationship, which, interestingly enough, was rare, even in places where I was working with friendly interlocutors who were either close allies or close coalition partners. And that was unusual.

I learned to appreciate Russia's culture; we've just been talking about it. I learned to understand Russian Orthodoxy. I had the opportunity quite frequently to meet with the Patriarch Alexy at the time. I talked to him about issues that were important. We talked rarely about religion, although he was clearly motivated by religious inspiration, and he brought that religious inspiration into his conversations with me. But at the same time, we talked about things that were of great importance to the future of Russia, often domestic problems that Russia was struggling with that, in one way or another, he or the Orthodox Church had reason to believe could be important.

He was concerned by outside proselytization of Russians by mainly of evangelical Christians from outside, including from the United States. And it was a bit of a struggle going on in that area. But he represented, early on, perhaps one of the most esteemed, if not the most esteemed organization in Russia by Russian citizens – perhaps the army ranked at various times up there with the Orthodox Church among these – and I found that extremely valuable. I think that over time, it was also possible for me – and I think today about those days – to visit the house of Pasternak, to visit places where the great Russians, Pushkin and so on, had lived both in and around Moscow and in the countryside, and to see how intensively the Russian state continued to honor these great accomplishers in the field of literature and poetry and in opera and in music and in composition, and the esteem that they were held in. These were all important because they gave you a better sense of how Russians' thinking had become

shaped by their own history and by their knowledge of what Russia was, what Russia had been, and what Russia could become.

Hanna Notte
Thank you for that, and thank you for those reflections on meeting with various interlocutors in Moscow personally, and then writing telegrams back to Washington. This is a perfect segue into my next question, which is about the process of foreign policymaking in the United States, particularly vis-à-vis Russia. That process, to an outside observer, seems to be a complex one with a crowded actor landscape. So, when it comes to foreign policymaking, how can we understand the role and the relative weight of the president, the secretaries of state and defense, Congress and other constituencies? And where does the role of the ambassador fit it? I mean, when the Washington bureaucracy is also in direct contact with Moscow, then what precisely is the role of the ambassador, and what are some of the opportunities and constraints within which he or she operates?

Ambassador Pickering
Let me begin with the ambassador, which is something I'm most familiar with, having worked for ambassadors and then having to perform as an ambassador. My sense has been, long before I was an ambassador, that the ambassador's role in American foreign policy was multifarious, many facets. That one of the key roles, if not the key role, was to know and understand American policy, to know and understand when it was working, but also to know and understand when it wasn't working. And then to have the wisdom, particularly through contacts with people in the country that was concerned with that policy as well as contacts with people carrying it out in the American embassy, of where it might be deficient or moving toward deficiency. And then using the platform that ambassadors had of writing a personal message to the State Department, sometimes to a special individual in the State Department.

I had the great joy and pleasure of working with Strobe Talbott. And Strobe knew and understood Russia as well as anyone. And Strobe was open to listening to ideas and frequently asked me for my reactions to thoughts and ideas about what was going on and where things might move or which we should be doing. This was a rich and, I think, valuable dialogue between us, but it allowed me, as I had done in other places, not to become a postman, delivering messages in two directions, but to become a policy advocate for change when it needed to come, and how it needed to be made. And this, in course, involves a certain sense of care, because the person I was working with was primary in having made the decisions to institute the policy we are now seeking to change in the first place.

And that individual, often an assistant secretary of state, but in Strobe's position, he occupied the position of assistant secretary of state for all the former Soviet Union. But there was never any question about, "You're seeking to spear my greatest achievement without giving it a chance to work." It was rather, I had to be careful, obviously, in explaining why I thought the policy needed some polishing, if we could put it that way, and he had to explain what he thought we could do to move in that direction, but he was very good. On a number of occasions, not too many, but a number, Strobe and I would be in touch – we had the

opportunity of having a secure telephone line, or what we believed was a secure telephone line, to speak over – and he would suggest to me, "The president's coming in a week. He's extremely interested in the following question. Could you give him no more than two paragraphs on what he should know about it and what he should be thinking about doing about it?" And that was absolutely unusual.

No assistant secretary had ever suggested that to me before. I don't think I had ever approached the question of writing the president of the United States a personal message from overseas. But Strobe believed that my judgment would be useful to the president; that was in itself an honor. But the messages that I sent would be heeded and listened to and absorbed. And I always did that; I always worked very hard on that message. A two-paragraph message is a lot harder to write than a 20-paragraph message. You have to get exactly in those things that are important, and you have to do it in a way that neither bores the president, nor in any way moves the president's thinking in a direction where you don't want the president to go. And it has to have the balance of presentation that makes for its credibility. And that was extremely interesting.

On a number of occasions, I had the privilege and the honor, both in Russia and elsewhere, but often in Russia, briefing the secretary of state, briefing senior State Department officers, deputy secretary occasionally, under secretary for political affairs on what was going on, often in visits back to the United States or visits when they came to Moscow. Strobe had with a senior Russian a strategic dialogue that big pieces of which took place when he visited Moscow, and I was always welcomed as a participant in these meetings and thought that that was, from my perspective, an unusual opportunity to explore in depth some of the same kind of questions that we explored bilaterally when there wasn't a visit going on in Washington, which I just explained. So, that all played a role. Secretaries of defense I got to know. I accompanied William Perry on a visit to northern Russia to see Russian efforts at breaking up missile submarines that were being retired as a result of arms control agreements to reduce the size of that fleet.

Those were always interesting and important, and they provided opportunities and side conversations during that travel to talk to the secretary of defense about questions that were on my mind as well the questions that were on his. And Bill Perry was, and still is, an old friend and a man whose judgment and capacities I esteem highly, as was Bill Cohen – we both attended the same school college in Maine many years apart, but that connection has always meant something important to me, and, I believe, to him, and we have continued from time to time to be in touch with each other.

So that covers much of what we were engaged in, but the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission was a very useful enterprise because it brought a wide range of American cabinet officers together with their Russian cabinet officers. It presented a large variety of opportunities to manage the relationship in a way that got close to the decision-making center in each of our countries, and as a result, we could do things more expeditiously and maybe more effectively by moving in that direction. It was something that was not a competition with the embassy so

much as a further instrument for improving the effectiveness of a relationship with the country, and the relationship with Russia was, and I believe remains, important. And a singularly most significant aspect of that was that as a result of the nuclear developments in both countries, we had the capacity to destroy each other, and perhaps most of the planet. And it was, therefore, a tremendously important issue that we conduct our relationships in a way that could be fully aware that no mistake should ever be permitted to go on long enough to have threatened that kind of activity.

And then I was acutely aware, as many of us were, that nuclear deterrence was singularly important. That if a nuclear exchange ever started, there wasn't anybody we knew who could give us a surefire way, to put it that way, to end such an exchange and to preserve humanity and the viability of our countries in the face of that kind of unmitigated disaster.

Hanna Notte
Thank you for that, Ambassador Pickering, for this comprehensive answer on how the role of the ambassador looked like, certainly when you were performing in Russia, and then also on the Bilateral Commission. I suppose an attempt was made later under President Obama and Medvedev to revive a similar format with the Bilateral Presidential Commission, though unfortunately that has long been dormant. But I want to shift slightly to the role of U.S. domestic politics in all of this, the role of domestic politics in enabling versus inhibiting, determining opportunities versus setting constraints for U.S. foreign policy, especially vis-à-vis Russia. And I do want to take one example to illustrate this question. In 1994, while you were serving in Moscow, the Democratic Party lost control over Congress. How instrumental was this shift for Clinton's leeway internationally, and what were some of the implications for the President's ability to navigate the relationship with Russia, if there were any implications?

Ambassador Pickering
Let me begin with that, and then talk a little bit about domestic and international issues and how they, in one way or another, affect American policy. I think the shift in the houses of Congress early in the first administration is a phenomenon that's not unusual in the United States, that presidents are elected in a wave of enthusiasm. They are given two years to perform miracles; that rarely happens. There is a buildup of backlash, and that takes its toll in the by-elections for the Congress after the first two years of the first term of an administration. And that, in many ways, is too short a time to be effective; much of it is in learning. And as a result, this kind of semi-automatic shift is difficult.

What's happened now, with the increasing polarization in the American Congress, is that that kind of a shift has become from an adverse set of circumstances to a disastrous division. And we need to be very concerned about it, and certainly, facing 2022, the American administration should and will have to do its very best to convince the American public that it should stay in control of the Congress, and this will be a very challenging activity for it.

But in 1994, it didn't become a fatal flaw. And there were people in both houses of the Congress, even with the change in leadership, that could get together on things, and that

Russia, in those days, despite differences about how tough to be with Russia, was more of a bilateral consideration. I can remember during my years in Russia, that it was Senator John McCain and the Republicans who always came out for election monitoring. The Democrats paid almost no attention to it. It was an enormous advantage for me to greet Senator McCain and his delegation. And he always made time for me and for him and his wife to have dinner together, a quiet, long discussion of what was going on in Russia. And I found him very broadly interested in Russia. He knew and understood both the upsides and the downsides of that relationship, and how important it was, and I found his advice, particularly on what to do regarding the Congress, was inordinately valuable. But the example of his leadership and coming to Russia for those numerous elections was very significant, and my pattern was always to accompany this delegation during the morning period, that is the A.M. period, of Russian elections and then – I would go with my interpreter because my Russian language, while I was studying it, was not nearly capable enough to deal with the complex situations that election monitoring required – we would go and walk around my neighborhood.

And I knew where the polling places were – and often, because we were close to the Russian Ministry of Defense, we would find military voting taking place, and talk to the election observers from the Russian parties, and understand how they were seeing things, and understand from the election officials, who were always welcoming, what their problems were and how they were resolving them. And it was very valuable because it gave one the sense, at least in the administration of an election, in terms of bringing the votes to the ballot box and then counting them at the end at the ballot box, it was done with considerable transparency and with considerable legitimacy. And as a result, one had a better sense that Russian elections, in those days at least, were being conducted with an effort to try to reflect a popular choice rather than Kremlin advocacy, if I could put it that way. And so, that part was important.

Domestic and foreign policy issues have increasingly blended together. Someone has coined the word 'intermestic' to describe the overlap between foreign policy and domestic issues. And much of that is true, that traditionally, American approaches in an electoral context have always been that domestic issues always outweigh foreign policy issues in part because many of them are bread and butter economic issues, and those are things that Americans choose to evaluate in their decision about voting for a candidate or not. And I think that's still important. There is also an old American tradition, now almost completely abandoned, that foreign policy differences stop at the water's edge, that we are one, united behind the government in its decisions as to how it will go in foreign policy. Now, much of the divisions on foreign policy creep well beyond the boundaries of the United States and play a role in other people's thinking and how they work. Election interference is unfortunately a seeming order of the day. Countries have to be as assiduous as they can be in stopping foreign interference where it begins, at the source, in the foreign country concerned, but recognizing that even overwhelming pressure and influence doesn't have the vocal capability to affect or block such intervention, and that you need defenses at home against that kind of intervention taking place.

The most insidious is obviously information operations which, in one way or another, tend to try to provide information to American voters in the multiple channels that are now available to do that, particularly using the internet, in ways that prejudice their voting outcome by pandering to prejudices that are known about, and which highlight and amplify those prejudices by adding false information into the mix. And people are much more likely to trust information, unfortunately, that panders to their prejudices, than somehow runs against them. And so, these questions exist.

Over time, with rare exceptions, I don't think any American election has been won on a particular foreign policy issue, but we do see debates that have turned or almost turned. Gerry Ford was unwilling to admit that Poland was a Communist country at the time. That Chinese Communist shelling of the little islands of Quemoy and Matsu, which were, in effect, under the control of Taiwan, was a particularly influential feature of an election in the early 1960s. We don't often find them; they're not replete in every election but many of them appear. And one would think that now, with the pandemic, with economic activities, the interrelationship between the foreign affairs aspects of both of those questions, and the domestic aspects, should be clearly apparent, understood and evaluated, even if, in fact, some of the earlier thoughts about the dominance of the domestic issues will still hold true and, perhaps, needs to be carefully evaluated as we get close to our next election.

Hanna Notte
Thank you, Ambassador Pickering, for these extremely comprehensive reflections on the domestic-foreign nexus. I want to come to the last question of our conversation today.

Ambassador Pickering
I'm sorry to hear, I really enjoyed talking about these things with you Hanna, thank you. Thank you too for the quality of your questions; they're important.

Hanna Notte
The big question that I reserved for the end of our conversation that we had, to bring it all together, and I do want to ask you, you have observed and been involved in your country's relations with Russia over decades. If you now reflect back on the trajectory of the U.S.-Russia relationship from the 1980s until the present day, where do you see the most consequential inflection points, misunderstandings, perhaps lost opportunities in that relationship over time?

Ambassador Pickering
Writ large, grosso modo, I would say the end of Communism on December 26, 1991, was a huge inflection point, the ramifications of which lasted quite a bit of time. The Boris Yeltsin choice of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin to assume a major position of national leadership in 2000 marked a serious inflection point. I would seek another inflection point, but pointing a date on it is harder, and that's the period where Putin began to feel increasingly that his own continuation in office depended very heavily on exploiting the American relationship and those pieces of the American relationship to which he objected and which he felt in an appeal to Russian nationalism would carry significant weight with the Russian voting public. And

perhaps that was two, three, four, five years into his first term when that began and represented the beginning of something that moved beyond a sense of suspicion and weariness to a sense that the future of his leadership of his country depended very heavily on being able to find ways, both true and false, to pick apart the American relationship.

Now, I've said nothing about America's response to any of these questions, and that figures deeply into the mix and adds complications, because the American response, as responses of almost any country to any major foreign policy issues, are often far from perfect and do not, in fact, comprehend all of the aspects of the problem. And even more difficult, the solutions do not present themselves in ways that, you could say, totally resolve every aspect of a problem; you take risks. President Biden took a serious risk in getting out of Afghanistan. But in my view, it was worth taking, because even after 20 years, there was no palpable end in sight, and a constant running on the deleterious treadmill of Afghanistan and getting nowhere, which is essentially where we were, required a president of stature and determination to take the obvious invidious risks of getting out.

And they were compounded by what took place, which was an energized and speeded up collapse of Afghan government authority in the aftermath of U.S. withdrawal and the uncertainties of the situations with respect to Afghanistan, and in light of the endemic corruption which had always plagued serious portions of the Afghan government in its effort to support and serve its own people.

Secondly, I would say, and I'm talking about current time, the willingness of President Biden, very early on, to take on three major pieces of legislation, to institute programs so expensive that they represented multiples of the regular American congressional budget were in that particular context also acts of high risk and high courage. And whether he will get all of that legislation or not, and whether it will emerge in perfect form or not, is uncertain. What I hope is that he will get a sufficient amount of that and a sufficient amount of success in that, and at days that seems to be a formidable mountain to cross to assure that continuity change and policy shifts that have been needed for 20 years will take place in the American system, which will do their bit in reinforcing the drop, we all know, that has taken place in foreign countries: esteem for, admiration of, and attachment to the United States.

No country continues forever to be the darling of other countries. Every country has to make mistakes or take risks, which have downsides. You cannot please all the people all of the time, as Abraham Lincoln wisely told us, nearly now, several hundred years ago. And as a result, an American president has to have courage and a deep sense about risk taking. And Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, and hopefully Joe Biden will represent the kind of president who sees the absolute necessity for change and the risks associated with that as part and parcel of what they must do to be fully supportive of their country and its interests.

Hanna Notte
Thank you so much, Ambassador Pickering, for this yet again very comprehensive answer. I think today we learned so much, not only about your time spent in Russia, but also about

foreign affairs, U.S. foreign policy, and what makes for diplomatic service and leadership more broadly. And I believe that our viewers, future scholars, scholars of Russia but also of foreign affairs more broadly, future generations of diplomats and ambassadors will hugely benefit from this conversation today. So, thank you so much.

Ambassador Pickering
Thank you, Hanna, very much. Let me thank you for your questions; they have been thoughtful and incisive and very useful. Let me apologize for the length of my response. Let me say how much I've enjoyed this; I've been honored to have been asked. I have had a special pleasure with deeply advancing age to reflect back on my career and my life, and hopefully to leave behind in this series of discussions some useful lessons – without too much encumbrance of other impedimenta in my responses – for those who would come forward. And if so, I've done what I hope to be another step in a public service career that has not ended. Thank you.

Hanna Notte
Thank you, Ambassador.

The Ambassadorial Series: Deans of U.S.-Russia Diplomacy

Transcripts of the Interviews

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Ambassador James F. Collins

Dates of Service as U.S. Ambassador in Moscow: 1997-2001

PART 1

Hanna Notte
Ambassador Collins, thank you so much for talking with us today in this sequel to the Ambassadorial Series interviews. It's a real honor for me to speak with you. You had a long and distinguished career serving in the U.S. government, including as deputy chief of mission and chargé d'affaires at the U.S. embassy in Moscow and then, of course, later as U.S. ambassador to Russia. So you were really engaged at the heart of American diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia during that fateful decade from the end of the Cold War leading up to President Putin's ascent to power. So, welcome today.

Ambassador Collins
Well, it's a pleasure to be with you, Hanna, and I look forward to talking with you. It was an exciting and challenging decade, and there's a lot to talk about.

Hanna Notte
Great. So let's get started, Ambassador. I would like to start our conversation in the year of 1990. You were then ready to go out to Moscow as deputy chief of mission. This is after the Berlin Wall had come down. The Warsaw Pact was coming apart; Germany was on the road to reunification. Nowadays, it seems to me that when we talk about these fateful events at the time – the end of the Cold War and associated developments, the end of Communism as a system of government in the USSR, and then the collapse of the Union itself – these events are often mixed up or even used interchangeably. And I want to ask you what, in your view, gave rise to this intellectual laziness, if you wish? Does it matter, and which misreadings of history, of these fateful events, have been most consequential to the trajectory of the U.S.-Russia relationship?

Ambassador Collins
Well, I think I'd like to start with something my wife has observed any number of times, and it's in the book she wrote about our four decades of seeing Russia. And that is that when you're part of history, and you're in a historic event, you don't know how it's going to come out. In the coup in 1991, as we were sitting at the embassy, we didn't know that it was going to fail until it did fail. Hindsight is always 20/20, but I can assure you that in-time sight is far less certain, and it's very much like someone who's near and farsighted at the same time.

And so, I would say, the first thing about the collapse of the Soviet Union, as a phenomenon or as a historic event, is that not only didn't we see it coming, the Russians didn't see it coming either. The Russians understood that they had been going through half a decade of profound

change in the way the Communist system was working. Gorbachev's reforms had changed a tremendous amount in the way daily life was taking place and how it was evolving. But if they thought anything was coming as we approached the sort of changes that came in '91, it was, "Well, fine, maybe we'll have a change of leadership, or this will result in a restructuring of the way that Politburo works," and so forth. Nobody thought, frankly, that the Soviet Union was coming to an end or breaking up or disappearing as a unifying element of all of Eurasia. It simply was not thought about.

So, I am not too concerned when people ask me "Why didn't you see it coming?" We didn't see it coming because frankly, nobody saw it coming. And the reason they didn't, is yes, all of the Warsaw Pact broke up, but Poland didn't. Germany reunified. So there was no real seeming threat right there to the breakup of the Union. Now, there were some signs that were important. The nationalist movements in the Baltics, for instance, were challenging Soviet control over those previously independent states. You had problems in the Caucuses that were challenging Moscow's central control over the region. And you had plenty of nationalist sentiment in countries like Ukraine. But frankly, nobody at the time the coup took place in August 1991 thought it was the end of the Soviet Union. It simply didn't mean that.

So, did we miss a lot? I'm not sure we did. I think we understood what the forces at work were. We had heard rumors of coups, but we heard those all the time. And so, the judgment, I think, was yes, this is a difficult time, there are changes coming, Gorbachev was engaged in the next big challenge to the system of reorganizing the way the Union was structured in terms of its control from the center versus greater local autonomy, but nobody thought this was going to produce the end of the empire completely.

Hanna Notte
Thank you for that. If we stay with the early 1990s for a moment, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 provided a first real test to the U.S.- and then still Soviet relationship under Gorbachev, especially if we consider that Iraq under Saddam had been a longstanding ally of the Soviet Union. And so, U.S. policy at that time, after the invasion of Kuwait, was driven by the assumption that Saddam wasn't just going to leave Kuwait unless he was confronted with overwhelming force and a credible threat of war. Hence, American diplomacy consisted in an attempt to isolate Saddam, to build a coalition against him, to pursue a military buildup. So I'd like to ask you, what was Moscow's position on this American approach as it was taking shape? What were the kinds of debates that you were having with Russian counterparts on this issue, and why do you think Gorbachev eventually decided to support the United States, to support the legal basis at the UN Security Council for what then became the first Gulf War? I mean, was it hard to convince the Russians to go along with the United States? Did specific individuals matter?

Ambassador Collins
Well, first, let me say that regrettably for this discussion, I was in transition at this time. So I was not traveling with the secretary of state, with Secretary Baker, as I had for the previous two years. I was off getting educated about how to be a DCM. I was more an observer than I

was a participant through all of this. A few things struck me as, obviously, more than an interested observer, I would say. First, the relationship between Moscow and Washington had gone a long way over the previous three, four years. I remember one major event took place in 1989 at the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution when Gorbachev and Bush met in Paris. It was the first time in which the Soviet government formally asked for international monetary loans. In other words, the Soviet government had, in a sense, implicitly joined the global economic system to the extent of being willing to take credit, build credits. That was quite a significant event. I remember people talking a lot about it among the Western alliance because it was unexpected, and it was a major shift in where things were going.

I think what happened after the invasion is, what I remember, was Secretary Baker was in Eurasia. He had been visiting – I think he visited Mongolia, and he was coming back into Russia and the Soviet Union. And at that time, he met with Gorbachev, after the invasion and so forth, and they agreed early on, I mean, almost at the time after the invasion, on an approach to the UN – a joint agreement that what Saddam had done was contrary to international law, and secondly, to go to the UN to try to get it resolved in some way. Now, I think that is where the Soviet Union remained. They did not, in any way, shape, or form want to see war break out because they knew, first of all, Iraq was going to lose, and secondly, they knew that if Iraq lost, it was going to endanger the relations they had with Iraq, which was one of their key allies in the Arab world. So preventing war but trying to get Saddam to see reason became their, I would say, policy, and they worked hard on that. They worked up to the very end, to the deadline for the outbreak of hostility. And in the end, they did not succeed.

Hanna Notte

Thank you very much for that. That's extremely interesting. I want to move slightly into the mid-1990s. Ambassador, you were senior coordinator and ambassador at large and special advisor to the secretary of state for the new independent states when the issue of NATO expansion became really acute in the mid-1990s. It seems to me that on the one hand, the U.S. administration was keen to develop these states' capacity to play their own role in the international system effectively, and getting them engaged in the Partnership for Peace and establishing working relationships between them and NATO was really part and parcel of that effort. On the other hand, however, you were also keenly aware of Russian opposition to any NATO expansion. I'd like to start by asking you how you were hoping to square that circle between those two conflicting dimensions. And why do you believe instruments like the Partnership for Peace or the NATO-Russia Founding Act ultimately proved to be insufficient instruments for diffusing tensions with Russia over the issue of NATO expansion?

Ambassador Collins

Well, I think one has to look at the '90s and this issue from two perspectives. First, it was an evolutionary set of conditions that changed as we went through that decade. We were not in the same place at the beginning of the decade vis-à-vis Russian attitudes and our policy as we were at the end. But secondly, I think there was a more profound problem at the root of all of the challenges that I would say were not really successfully met. And that was that the United States and Russia had a very different idea about what Europe and the Euro-Atlantic world

was going to look like after the end of the Cold War. That essentially was, I would describe as follows: the American perspective usually, I would say, put most simply, saw it as the defeat of Communism and the Soviet idea, and the model that it represented as the outcome of the Cold War, and therefore, thinking in terms – as Americans often do – about wars that we've won, the idea was that we would then shape the future according to what we thought the agreed perceptions were among those who prevailed.

And remember, in many ways even Yeltsin and the Russian government, not very long after the collapse of the Soviet Union, more or less agreed that the Soviet Union was at an end, and that it had all become something different in the context of what Eurasia was to be. On the other hand, the Russian perception had one very profound difference, and that was they hadn't lost anything. They too had won. They had ended the Communist system; they had gotten rid of the Communist Party domination. They had also ended the empire in a peaceful way. They had also committed to the complete revolutionary transformation of their economy, to join the global economic system. What they didn't agree to was that they had lost. And Russia was still, from their point of view, the other great power in the Euro-Atlantic world, a power that was going to shape the future of a new system for the entire community as in something like an equal to the United States, as it had been before. They, after all, remained the nuclear superpower. They had not lost that position.

And so, we had two very different views about what had happened with the end of the Soviet Union in a way. More to the point, a very different view about how and who would develop, and I would say, constitute the new post-Cold War structure of the Euro-Atlantic world. Now, the Americans in the end, over time, opted for doing all of this restructuring in the context of the system of the NATO security system. The Russians, for their part, from the very outset, rejected that idea and were always looking for a way in which Russia and the U.S., and maybe some other great powers in Europe, would be the arbiters and developers of the new system. So they opted to push things like the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation, which was a full, where everyone was a member. There were no differences in memberships.

Now, the United States explored other options which were more attractive to the Russians in the beginning and first half of the '90s. The Partnership for Peace, remember, was joined by Russia itself. They became a member of the Partnership. They saw it as NATO was continuing to exist, but it was the NATO that had existed before the end of the Cold War, and then these other nations were having a relationship with that alliance. They were not members; they were all equal, so Poland and Russia were in the same place vis-à-vis NATO. All of these others were members of this so-called Partnership, and they were all, in a sense, working to develop a new set of arrangements with NATO, and NATO with them.

That worked quite well for a couple or three years. And I have to say, when I was ambassador-at-large and was going out to these other new states, it was a terrific thing to have as a tool in my kitbag, to say, "We are working with you to help you join this Partnership; to be an effective ally or partner of NATO; to be a partner in all that the new security system will help to make possible in the way of security and independence for all of these states in Europe." So

that was phase one. Phase two, I would say, came in sort of the middle of the '90s, and it was preceded by a couple of things. First of all, the war in Bosnia was something that evolved, in a way, from the standpoint of the U.S. and Russia, in a very interesting way. There was something called the Contact Group. It was kind of what the Russians, I think, always had in mind as the Security Council of Europe. It was the main powers; they met, they more or less talked about how to approach bringing the Bosnia thing under control and so forth. In the end, it produced also agreement that the Russians would provide peacekeeping forces under U.S. command in the post-conflict Bosnian situation.

In other words, Russia was willing to be a part of a security operation run under the NATO flag by the Americans, and take part in that. Now, at the same time, the whole movement and the pressures in the U.S. for bringing new members into NATO was building. The Russians were adamantly opposed to this. There was no question they didn't want it to happen. On the other hand, they also knew there was nothing they could do to stop it.

And so, you've asked about the Founding Act that was negotiated in the middle of the '90s. The Founding Act was in essence an effort to negotiate with the Russians the terms under which they would accept the accession to NATO and new membership of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary in return for assurances about what NATO would and would not do east of the old alliance boundaries, that is, east of Germany. And the terms of that talked about limits on the kind of deployment of any NATO forces that did occur in those new member states, on the way NATO could behave in them, et cetera, et cetera. In turn, while Russia was never willing to embrace the accession to NATO as something they wanted, they said that they would not oppose it. Now, this was, more or less, something they couldn't stop anyway, so fine. Now, the NATO Founding Act, in theory, created a new condition, and I know it was certainly the understanding of the Russians that, okay, we did this, that's where it is now, that's it. The new arrangement now exists.

And that was okay, reasonable for a while. The idea that Russia would meet with NATO allies in the NATO-Russia Council and so forth was founded. The Russians never liked it because they always said it was always 14 against one or 17 against one. It was never Russia as an equal member of the discussion. It was NATO versus Russia, et cetera. So it was never fully successful by any means, but it also, frankly, was always a fragile kind of arrangement, and one that, frankly, the United States side, I would say, found it difficult to keep up because there were pressures building, first of all, not to have that be the last word. Now we were going to begin to get the pressure to have the Baltic states join NATO. And there were pressures to have something that was testing the boundaries, let's say, of how the NATO forces in these new three countries would be deployed or not deployed, or what role they would have and so forth.

So, the reality was, once you had the first new accessions to NATO, I think the challenge for the American-Russian relationship simply grew ever stronger as pressures mounted for the NATO model to be the one that was going to be pushed to define the new security structure for Europe, and the Russian view that that was not the kind of model that they were prepared

to see as legitimate new structure for the whole Euro-Atlantic world. What they were clearly saying was, even in the middle of the '90s, "Baltic states maybe, but no further. No further into former Soviet space." And that, frankly, became the hard red line that we found was a real one two decades later.

Hanna Notte
Thank you for that, Ambassador. That's incredibly useful. If I may, I'd like to ask you a slightly more conceptual follow-up question on what you just said. You outlined these very divergent U.S. versus Russian views of how the Euro-Atlantic space should be structured after the end of the Cold War. So essentially, America found itself with a Russian interlocutor in the 1990s which had formally renounced empire; the direct rule by Moscow of the other republics had ended, yet on the other hand, Russia effectively did stake out an entitlement or claim to a privileged sphere of influence in its neighborhood. So, from an American point of view, then, where are the lines between empire, hegemony, sphere of influence, and what is sort of an acceptable degree of Russian entitlement, if you wish, to have a say over the path of its neighbors – whether that's rooted in history, threat perceptions, or something else – versus a degree of undue Russian influence that should really be rejected? How does one judge what is acceptable versus unacceptable? Is it a case-by-case decision? How were you thinking about those questions in the middle of the 1990s?

Ambassador Collins
Well, first of all, in the '90s, I think up through the '90s, really, even into Putin's early years, the issues that you're sort of suggesting were not as stark as they become in the last decade and a half from where we are now, from the mid-2000s on. But I think the reality is – Russia was the great power in Eurasia, and that meant all of its neighbors had the problem of living with a big power, one that was tremendously bigger than any one of them. Now, I don't want to get myself into trouble here, but I mean, fundamentally, my guess is that Mexico and Central America and a number of other countries in the western hemisphere have thought similarly that it's not easy to live with that big thing in the north. We do have something called the Monroe Doctrine, and we've damn near come to nuclear war over the then Soviet Union trying to put military forces, including missiles, into a country in this hemisphere.

So, the issue of great power and neighbors is not unique to the Russian system. And I think the reality was even more complex because in the breakup of the empire, yes, the political boundaries were set, new governments emerged rather quickly and began to govern, but the residue of the divorce process between the center in Moscow and the successor to the Soviet government, which was Russia, and all of those neighbors was very complicated and very complex. They had to define boundaries, they had even more trouble in the context of developing national economies and relations of economy that were state to state rather than one big economy under a central authority. All of this was tremendously complex and difficult in the '90s and was not even finished even at the end of them. And so, Russian development of its relations with neighbors, it seems to me, has been an evolutionary process.

It's taken place over quite a period of time. And it began, I think, with probably an assumption, first of all, that, if you remember the initial breakup of the Union that was foreseen, was in the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Now, exactly what that was supposed to be, it was not clear, but it was essentially to be some kind of a unified community in terms of its past and kind of its interests, its commonwealth states. At the same time, it was independent states. And Yeltsin, from the very outset, was wedded to the idea that they would be independent. So he negotiated the borders, he negotiated issues that questioned anything about independence. Some issues were left never resolved completely, but they were working to try to get them settled. And I would say that Yeltsin's position throughout his presidency was that those states were independent, they were sovereign, but they were also Russia's neighbors, and Russia had interests at stake in how they behaved vis-à-vis the rest of the world. To put it quite simply, even Yeltsin, I think, with all of his readiness to support their independence and sovereignty, was never going to see as something that was acceptable the appearance of the U.S. First Cavalry Division on the Ukraine-Russian border, because that was a different question. That was an issue of security for the homeland.

I think the premise at the beginning was always that Russia did have a different relationship with these immediate new neighbors, the former republics. The question was, how was it going to be arranged and what was it. Now, in my experience during much of the '90s, those new states were very much concerned, most of all, in developing their own statehood, their own sovereignty, their own capacity to govern themselves. They had much more experience dealing with Moscow, frankly, than we ever did. They knew how to manipulate them in many ways and other things, and many of them defined themselves almost as not Russian, which I never thought was terribly healthy. You know, they needed to be either Ukrainians or Georgians or Uzbeks or whatever in their own right, not just 'not Russians'.

But I think it was also true that when I would visit the countries, and I did, it was clear to me that there were limits to what the United States was able to do to ensure the security and sovereignty and independence of those nations unless they were capable of doing a great deal of that work effectively themselves, because the idea that the United States was going to go to war over Kyrgyzstan with Russia was not real. It simply wasn't a fact, so the question was how could we assist them in developing their sovereignty and independence and independent existence. But I always thought we had to have a very realistic view about what the U.S. could and could not do, and what we needed to encourage those states to do to develop a working and rational relationship with their big northern neighbor. In that, I – sometimes, I was not fully understood in Washington, I think.

The idea was they're independent, they're sovereign, the Russians have no say in it. In fact, much of the way in which American thinking went about what was happening in that region was that our principal objective was to prevent the restoration of the Russian Empire. And that essentially meant that we were intent not so much on developing the countries around Russia and getting them to have a relationship with their northern neighbor that would work as we were in preventing Russia from having a future in those countries, which I think was unrealistic.

And the Russians, more or less, didn't pay a lot of attention to this for a considerable time. In fact, the Russian approach was, they were developing their own relations. They didn't think that they were having a problem with these nations, except possibly Ukraine and the Baltics. There was, I would say, not a major concern that the United States was going to replace them or that we were going to have problems. The "problem children" were Ukraine and Georgia increasingly, because they kept saying "We want to join those guys in the West, the NATO people." And for the Russians, that was just, I would say, a red line, and it was from the beginning. That, as I said, if you looked at it from the standpoint of security, I am sure the Russian General Staff was presenting the unacceptable idea of American forces ending up on the Russian border in Ukraine or in Georgia. Now, this may have been unrealistic, but it doesn't mean that they weren't capable of thinking the worst case. And, you know, they watched what we were doing in Poland and Czechoslovakia and Czech Republic, and Hungary, and development of anti-missile defenses – not in the '90s, but some of this was there. And they were concerned.

I think that was a position that existed from the beginning, and our efforts, frankly, to challenge it frontally were always, probably, going to produce an equally sharp rebuke. And that was, I think... That plays out very unfortunately in the last decade and a half.

Hanna Notte
Thank you so much for such a comprehensive answer. That's really useful. Russia maintained or retained a significant nuclear arsenal after the end of the Cold War, so I want to turn the conversation to strategic arms control for a second. When you were a DCM at the embassy in the early '90s, the United States and Russia negotiated the START Treaty which called for the destruction of immense numbers of nuclear weapons and opened up an unprecedented system of verification and transparency in the systems of strategic arms. First of all, I want to ask you: it's my understanding that the U.S. Embassy in Moscow played a role in support of these negotiations towards the START Treaty. How did that work? What is it that the U.S. Embassy in Moscow fed into the negotiations? And how did the different pieces come together in the U.S. inter-agency process in preparation for these negotiations?

Ambassador Collins
Well, let me begin with a slightly different question, because I think the background to it is extremely important. When the Soviet Union broke up, I would say there was no higher priority in the U.S. approach to that region, and I stress the region here, not just Moscow, but the whole kit and caboodle of the empire, than ensuring the nuclear arms that existed around that country were, first of all, protected and under competent control, and secondly, that we had as a strategic goal from the very outset a withdrawal of all such arms, both tactical and strategic, back into the Russian Federation or their destruction in place. Now, there was no higher priory than that, I believe, in the policy of the United States at the time of the Soviet breakup because the idea, first of all, that you could have the outbreak of civil war – and nobody took it for granted that was not possible – in a country where nuclear weapons were around was a frightening prospect, and one that no one could contemplate with any

equanimity. Now fortunately, I think the people in Moscow had the same view; really, the others in the rest of the country, the leaders also pretty much had the view that we had to find a way to get through that and get rid of it.

So the first priority that was on the agenda was to ensure that all the tactical nuclear weapons, to the extent we could verify it, had been withdrawn from the non-Russian republics back into the Russian Republic or into Russia after the breakup, and secondly, to negotiate the end of the presence of these strategic nuclear weapons in Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus. And so, strategic arms, in that sense, from the beginning, and in the earliest stage, were very much focused on that issue. Now, I have to tell you, it's very nice, you're very complimentary to DCMs and ambassadors and embassies and this kind of thing, but, frankly, when it came to the negotiation of something like the START Treaty, the embassy's role was a limited one. Sure, we did things to support the negotiating teams and all this kind of thing, and we reported on all of the questions and issues that were of relevance to the negotiations as they were ongoing. That was part of our contribution. But did I, as chargé, or the ambassador, even when he was there, have a direct input very much, or significantly, into the negotiating process? Not a lot, frankly. It was limited.

The arms control world had a dynamic of its own. They had a very competent, very impressive group of people who had their counterparts on the Russian side. Those were the people who did the negotiating and got the decisions made. Now, in the interim between sessions and so forth, yes, I carried the mail to the Russian negotiating side. Their ambassador carried the mail to our negotiating side. There was back and forth, and there were visits by senior people exploring issues, particularly as things moved, people like Strobe Talbott would come and have talks with counterparts about these issues, but did the embassy itself play a major role or did even I, in Washington as the assistant secretary equivalent, as ambassador-at-large for that region, have a strong voice? Well, I knew what was going on, I tried to be sure that what I heard made sense to me, that people weren't going off on what I thought was a tangent that was not realistic vis-à-vis what the Russians were saying or doing, but, you know, Washington is a very big place and there are lots of people with voices. I used to joke that I had about 85 ambassadors to Russia. So, there were plenty of voices.

But the embassy's role, I would say, was important as reporter, as being a competent, capable, both reporter of what we were asked to convey but also what we thought would be important for Washington to understand. We were an important conveyor of messages to the Russian government from the Washington side when that was necessary. And, you know, we had a voice. We were the people on the ground; we did go around; we knew lots of people. And our voice was heard in the policy circles making decisions about the negotiation. But were we more than one voice? Not really. I mean, we were significant, but not dispositive in almost anything.

Hanna Notte
Thank you. That's very clear. I want to ask a follow-up question on arms control in the early '90s. We had this momentum with the START Treaty; we had the Nunn-Lugar CTR Programs;

we had negotiation towards the Chemical Weapons Convention at the time, but one area where perhaps more could have been done was on the question of tactical or non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe. I mean, you had the pledges in the so-called Presidential Nuclear Initiatives from December 1991, but then no negotiation towards a verifiable agreement or treaty. And I'd like to ask you to elaborate on this a little bit. Why were the non-strategic nuclear weapons such a hard lift at the time?

Ambassador Collins
It's a hard question, and I'm not sure I've got a good answer to that, except that for the Russian side, remember that the border in Europe, the European border from the Baltic to the Black Sea isn't the only border. There was another big country out there that at this time had a relationship a good deal different from what it is now with the Russians. There were a lot of uncertainties about what the future of the relations with China and the Asian heartland was going to be. Russia was weak, was uncertain even about whether it could hold itself together, for sure. And so, I think tactical nuclear weapons may have had quite a different meaning for Russia's security establishment in terms of their ability to defend the homeland than just a question of whether, if we got ours out of Germany, they could get rid of all of theirs. I mean, it was just not, I think, the same question.

And I think in that sense, the strategic issue has always had a different meaning to the Russian side, and understandably. They are defending a territory where, for huge tracts of it, they don't have any people. They're defending borders that are humongous. And so the question of deterrence, I think, in that dimension is an extremely important part of the way they think about this. Secondly, I think it's just a reality that the Russian side, particularly after the breakup, has a population that doesn't even, you know, it's half of Europe, it's not even half of Europe's population, much less ours. We're dealing here with a country at a huge disadvantage, in almost every single way you could think, of actually being able to resist in the worst case. And so, I think tactical nuclear weapons were kind of the ultimate deterrent, that you didn't just have to go to war with the United States and end everybody, was the thinking, but you could make it awful hard for people who were trying to cause you pain or take a part of your territory if you had this kind of weapon at hand.

I don't know that I see well into the Russian mind; I'm not an arms control expert. I never professed to be. But to me, the problem on the tactical nuclear weapons always had to do with the disproportionate role I think Russia's security establishment saw them playing in their own capacity to defend the homeland. We didn't see it that way. We didn't have a nuclear threat, a tactical weapons problem. Europe did, but not the United States. And so, our mentality about this was, I think, just different from theirs. That said, there are all sorts of technical reasons about why it was difficult to come to any agreements or why they weren't willing to talk about it. It was a little bit like missile defense was to become. I mean, we said it's not a threat; they're, more or less, saying tactical weapons aren't a threat either. People see things differently that way. So, I think that's in great part the reason.

The Nunn-Lugar Program fundamentally had a very simple premise, and that is that United States would be more secure if you could get rid of the strategic nuclear weapons that were required to be destroyed or were in those other non-Russian states as soon as possible and safely. And that we would also be more secure if we knew that the nuclear arsenal of the Russian Federation, post-Soviet, was under secure and stable control. And so, the idea was the Americans would provide money and funding and, to the extent necessary, would support expertise and exchange and so forth, and to achieve that in the Russian Federation, which was broke. That's what this was all about.

There were basically two or three basic programs in it. One was to destroy and eliminate the nuclear warheads and the nuclear weapons as required under the START Treaty, and that was true in Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus, as well as in the Russian Federation. The second was to try to ensure that any nuclear materials that remain, weapons and so forth, were going to be stored and secured in ways that ensured their security and close control by competent authority. And the third was to try to ensure that the build down of the nuclear industry across the board in all of those countries, but particularly in Russia, did not result in a lot of nuclear expertise and knowledge and personnel and so forth going off to other countries where it was thought they were trying to develop nuclear weapons, which would have been a big problem.

And so, really extraordinary programs were undertaken. I'm not going to get into the details. I would only say that for the '90s, almost for the entire decade, without a lot of problems, say for an often obstruction by security authorities, the Russian and American counterparts worked cooperatively and effectively to achieve all the ends that that program had set for itself. And it was really quite extraordinary because once you posited for the nuclear scientists in these, say, old, closed cities, the problem that they had to jointly achieve, they got to work and they did it, and they did it extremely competently. We built new nuclear storage sites with them; we helped them decommission nuclear reactors and nuclear weapons and warheads. All of this stuff, basically extremely competent cooperation between experts from both sides, and the political dimension was not an issue. Whatever the differences were, they got on with the job because the job had been agreed.

I think it was a lesson for what's possible when you get to the point where you can agree on the objective. So it was an extraordinarily, I would say, inspiring program, in many ways, for both sides. It was quite something to watch the way the nuclear scientists from both sides would sit down, and they exactly understood one another and knew how to approach, knew what the issues were, talked over the options they had, and would then recommend the decision about what to do. It was real professional work. It was a bit like the space station, which was the same kind of project.

Hanna Notte

Thank you for sharing that success story of cooperation. I do want to turn our conversation to the issue of Kosovo. You already touched upon the Kosovo crisis in the first interview of the Series with Jill Dougherty – the crisis of Kosovo in 1998. And you explained how this became a major setback for Yeltsin, who failed to prevent U.S. military intervention in Serbia, and how

this really led to an unprecedented turn against Americans in Russia. And I would like to dig a little deeper into the issue today, if I may. First of all, I'd like to ask you: could you characterize your interactions with Russian counterparts on this issue both prior to and after the U.S. decision to bomb Serbian targets to stop Milosevic's campaign against the Kosovars? I mean, what were the Russians saying to you, and was the United States prepared for the extent to which this really turned into a domestic issue in Russia, shaped the Russian public mood so strongly? Or did this come as a surprise to the United States?

Ambassador Collins
Well, we're going back more than 20 years, and I'm not sure my immediate memory is all that good about exactly what I was doing then on a day-to-day basis. So I'm not sure I can give you a good picture of what I was saying to the Russians, but clearly the Russian position is one that I understand. And I would also tell you that there was a good deal of direct communication between the Kremlin and Washington that I wasn't privy to during this time, but I know what it was about. It was about basically Yeltsin doing his utmost to prevent Clinton from going to the military option. He absolutely was adamant that he wanted the Americans to avoid doing that.

Now, I don't know for sure what the dynamics were inside the team, there, in the Kremlin. But clearly Yeltsin understood that it was going to be a defeat for him if he was not able to prevent his friends, the Americans, from going to war against an emotional brother of the Russian people. And believe me, there was plenty of propaganda about all of this, about why were the Americans standing up for the Muslims in Kosovo, why were they being anti-Serb, et cetera, et cetera. So Yeltsin was in a bit of a corner in all of this. Plus, I think he himself felt it was an absolute disaster to use a military option against Serbia. Now, were we prepared for this? Were the Americans, I think, sensitive enough to what this was going to mean? No, they weren't. I'm not sure we at the embassy even understood how deeply the reaction was going to go or how effective the people who were Yeltsin's critics were going to be in using what we did in Serbia against him and against, if you will, the Westerners, but they were, and it put them on the defensive, and it made it very difficult for the Yeltsin team for quite some time.

Now, Yeltsin is a shrewd politician, and he did manage to extricate himself by essentially, after a couple of weeks of being beat up over the issue, portraying his critics as warmongers trying to get the Russians into a war in the Balkans and at the same time offering to be the peacemaker, saying he's willing to send Chernomyrdin to see Milosevic, try to bring the fighting to an end, get a cease-fire, whatever, in other words, get this onto a negotiating track and stop the military action. Now, the run up to all of this had been troubled. We had a position in which we were basically trying to draw a red line for Milosevic. And Milosevic, just like Saddam before, wasn't paying much attention. And similarly, the Russians were trying to preserve their relations with an important ally, or important partner, and knew that he was in for deep, deep trouble if he got himself into a war with the West. And again, they failed in the first instance, but in the end, in some sense, Yeltsin pulled himself out of it by, in many ways, being the catalyst to get the fighting stopped and moving on to a negotiated outcome.

But the damage was very serious for the Americans because in a way, the Americans had been sold to... and I think the way the Yeltsin group has always presented us as, the Americans were not warmongers, they were trying to keep the peace, they were trying to make peace and so forth. And this undercut that position, that somehow, we were just using our military whenever we didn't get our way. That shook a lot of the confidence in the United States, I think. And it did go very deep because people did know about Serbia, and the idea that these were our Orthodox brothers. There had always been a special relationship with Serbia. It went much lower down into the population as an issue than most others had up to that time.

Hanna Notte
Thank you so much for that, Ambassador. Turning from Kosovo to another conflict, you witnessed both the first and second Chechen War, the first, I believe, from Washington, the second from Moscow as U.S. ambassador. Could you talk a little bit about the differences, if any, in U.S. assessment and perceptions of the two Russian campaigns in Chechnya and the impact those had on the U.S.-Russia relationship?

Ambassador Collins
Well, I guess first of all, I'd say that both of them had a negative impact. This was portrayed, rightly or wrongly, as the big ogre beating up on a little minority in the American psyche. Therefore, the little guy or the underdog had probably more supporters than even was necessarily warranted. But the issue was essentially whether the Russian Federation's territorial integrity was going to survive. And in the case of the first war, it was coming in the aftermath, or as decisions were emerging and being made that were, in fact, strengthening the unity of the Russian Federation, where the compromises and so forth required with local leaders and others were bearing fruit and creating a more effective central government, and where the questions about whether the Russian Federation was going to survive were being put to rest much more... And here, the Chechens are actually openly challenging that premise. So, there was no question about that.

Yeltsin, I think, must have explored a number of options. I think he'd been told by the security services, by the military, by others that they could take care of this and, you know, make sure it didn't happen. None of it worked. Meanwhile, pressures were growing on him about keeping the Union together, about the unacceptability of what the Chechens were doing in the area. And so, he, I guess he asked the then chairman of the Joint Chief Ministry of Defense, Grachev, to solve the problem. I think Grachev told him "Don't worry, I can deal with it in a couple weeks," and, of course, you had the outbreak of the first Chechen War, which turned into a disaster.

Now, my main concern about that was the longer that it went on, the harder it became for the American government to keep it to the side and keep going on the other issues which were extremely important to us and not let the Chechen War overwhelm our ability to do things rationally with Moscow. So my sense was we had to get this stopped somehow. In that sense, I did advocate the outcome that was ultimately successful in getting the cease-fire after a

time, which was to use the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe as a mediator, bring about a cease-fire and provide observers, in essence stop the war. That actually did work. The OSCE people managed to get it stopped. The issue, in a sense, was put on hold, if you will, I suppose. The military dimension receded as an issue, but nothing was really solved in terms of, I would say, resolving the fundamental issues that were challenging, the issue of relations between Moscow and Chechnya. But it bought time, and I thought it was a success because it did take it off the agenda as a front-burner issue and let us continue with pursuing the other issues on our agenda that were terribly important.

The second war comes after Putin is prime minister, and there is all sorts of stories about whether he had a role in bringing about things that precipitated the response of Russia to terrorist activities in Moscow and elsewhere. In any event, yes, I was there. We were opposed to the restarting, if you will, of the all-out Chechen War. I remember being sent into, after the initial invasion by Russia of Chechnya, sent in to ask Putin as prime minister whether or not there was going to be a halt of the forces at the big river boundary in Chechnya. I didn't really get an answer, although he said implicitly yes, and he basically lied to me because the objective, I think, with Putin was to put an end to this, to create conditions in which Moscow's interest in preserving the unity and territorial integrity was going to be preserved. And his solution to it in the end, because he wanted to end the fighting, he didn't want it to continue, was what I have always called 'Chechenization,' which was basically, turn the governance of that province over, more or less, to the leaders, Kadyrov, and basically tell them: you can pretty much have a free hand if you do not challenge our authority that you are in the Russian Federation and you basically, in a sense, behave reasonably outside Chechnya.

Now, I think that's more or less what was done. I think it is what has continued ever since. I think Putin's solution to it was not to have good governance in Chechnya, it was to have Chechnya remain a part of the Russian Federation, do certain things as a constituent part, but not ask much questions about what Mr. Kadyrov and his crowd were doing internally in that province. And they more or less run it as they see fit, so far as I can tell.

Now, did we accept that? Well, I guess so. It ended the fighting; it brought an end to the war in Chechnya. We no longer had to deal with the Russian military turning Grozny into Berlin 1945 and so forth, but did we leave the Chechens better off? I'm not sure we did at all. I think it kept the issue of Chechnya as a challenge for any sort of leadership, American or Russian, intact but on hold because we accepted a bargain, which was that Mr. Kadyrov would be in charge.

Hanna Notte

Thank you very much for that, Ambassador. I'd like to turn to a set of questions related to Russia's political and economic transition in the 1990s and the role played by the United States here. Starting with Russia's economic transition, the United States was quite active in supporting economic reforms in all sorts of ways through all sorts of programs, and the Russians were also quite proactive in asking for advice on how to establish a market economy in their country. Now, of course, this changed abruptly with the Russian financial crisis of 1998. I'd like to ask you, could the United States have done more to support Russia's

economic transition? Was this about more programs, more money, or actually do a better job at understanding realities on the ground, or, in fact, done a better job at managing Russian expectations? What do you think about this, and what do you conclude from this period, really, about any foreign government's ability to assist another country in such a fundamental transition?

Ambassador Collins
Well, I think there are several levels on which to discuss that question. One simple level is to say that the Americans, and also our European allies because they also played a strong role in the transition, were very successful in taking what had been an unworkable command economy under the Soviet Communist Bolshevik system and turning it into a market system – because across the entire region of Eurasia today, we have a market economic system. It may be flawed in many ways, it may be a difficult one, it may be corrupt, it may be excellent. I mean, there are all kinds of things that are not necessarily what Americans would say is the ideal, wrong with it, but it is a market economy. And to have transitioned that in what amounted to about a decade was nothing short of almost miraculous, because it wasn't just Russia, it was across the whole region. So on the one hand, I would say there was tremendous success in what was done, and I don't think anybody ought to denigrate or deny – that's number one.

Now, in terms of other questions, were there things we could have done? Of course there were. I'm sure there were many things we could have done better, things that we could have understood better. I think one of the most difficult issues for all of the people dealing with the Russian transition was the almost impossibility of understanding how little most Russians, and I don't count the few experts that were dealing with the banking system or whatever, but most Russians understood about even fundamental basic concepts of the market economy, like money or how banks worked, or how personal property was regarded. I mean, none of this was in the genes, nobody had ever lived with this in the Russian Federation. So, I think the assumption that you could just go in and tell people or explain to people and they'd get it, often was misplaced. You had, often, a good deal of misunderstanding. I think in that sense, what I would say is we didn't listen enough. We didn't explore enough what we were being told by people. And I think that was a challenge, and remember, almost none of the people who ever came in to do the work from AID or the other European equivalents had any experience dealing with a Communist government and society that never had experienced a market economy. Remember, nobody in the Soviet Union ever lived under a market economy, virtually, unless they were 90 years old.

That was one big problem. I do think there was a lot of misunderstanding about how much they understood. And in that sense, I think you're correct. More, better explanation, better management of expectations and so on is something that could have been done better. On the other hand, I think it's also true that the Russian side had totally unrealistic expectations about what could happen. I remember, and maybe I mentioned this in the previous one, one minister asking me one day whether – and this was when I was DCM – whether I could send them a team to tell them how to make a market economy. What did they have to do? It was sort of

like, make a few decisions, or a few changes, well, I mean, no sense of the complexities or the deep challenges they faced. On the money side – I don't think it was a money question, frankly. I do think it was, and one mistake that we increasingly got ourselves tied into was in assuming that the Polish model, or the shock therapy model and so forth, was going to produce the same results in Russia that it did in a place like Poland because it became pretty clear, increasingly clear, I think, that it was not going to be that easy.

And that Yeltsin had a much bigger political problem on his hands in managing, showing his people across 11 time zones that changing from the old system, in which the government guaranteed everything even if you didn't get it, to one in which you were responsible, in a sense, for providing your future through your decisions about how you manage your family's finances and so on. I mean, this was a whole revolution in a society's thinking, and managing the transition to that adequately, giving greater weight to the social impact of the economic changes, is something I think we didn't do enough of. I remember, too, that to the extent Americans had tools to affect what was happening in Russia, it tended to be money. Well, money didn't answer a lot of the problems, and then we got into the idea that you were gauging whether it'd be successful or not by whether the interest rate was right or not. Well, this was all quite artificial in a way. It ignored the fact that much of the market economy was based on barter. A lot of people were making arrangements that had nothing to do with normal market systems, et cetera.

We, I think, could have paid more attention to the social transformative impact of some of the things we were doing and listening more to the Russian side about the problems they were having managing it than we did, but I don't think more money would have done much. I think we often gave very effective advice and support. I think there were times we didn't know when to stop, that also was an issue. I think there were times when having explained to them, it was time to get out of the way and leave them alone. We tend to not want to do that. AID never wanted to leave and....

The second thing I would say is that it wasn't just the government. When I went out as ambassador, I visited the banking community in New York to see what was their assessment of what they were doing, and they were happy as clams. They were making a lot of money in Russia, servicing Russian government debt and so forth. They were getting very good interest rates on it, and they were very upbeat about the whole picture and its future. And I think, you've asked about 1998. I think 1998, and I happened to be here when the collapse took place, just for a couple of weeks. What I watched was the newspapers turn 180 degrees from Russia is a success story to they are a bunch of no-goods who don't... who welch on their debts. Now, I read that as simply meaning that an awful lot of people who had been selling Russian debt and making a lot of money and making a lot of profit out of working on the Russian account had egg all over their faces because it didn't turn out well. And I didn't have a lot of sympathy for it. If you didn't know, getting the high interest rates that they were getting, that there were going to be some problems – even I'm not a banker, but I had my suspicions.

I think, you know, there was definitely a very negative impact from the financial implications and the way the media played it after that, that Russia was unreliable or that, even more absurdly, that the Americans were responsible for everything, we should have known who "lost" Russia. Well, we never "had" Russia of course, but this whole idea that somehow, we were responsible for the way everything turned out all over the place in Eurasia was just nonsense. Did we have a function and a role? Yes. Did we have some influence? Yes. But were we able to call the shots? No, of course not. I won't argue that there weren't people who should have seen something coming or whatever, but if Wall Street didn't, you know, they're the ones who had the money in the game, and they didn't see it. It's a bit like the collapse of the Soviet Union. If you don't see it when you're a participant, it's not too likely that everybody was going to see it who was an observer.

PART 2

Hanna Notte
Ambassador Collins, I would like to ask you what conclusions you draw from Russia's experience in the late 1980s and then into the 1990s regarding the relationship and sequencing of political versus economic change. It seems to me that, in Russia's case, political change, which was set in motion with Glasnost, moved at a faster pace than economic Perestroika. So already in 1990, you were kind of in a situation where the information space had opened up, there was an unprecedented degree of political competition, yet there was also economic drift and decline for the average citizen on a day-to-day basis. Then this continued into the 1990s. Do you think Washington properly understood the extent to which political and economic change were out of sync? And what lessons do you draw from this experience?

Ambassador Collins
Well, I do think you are correct that the political and economic dimensions of the transformation that was going on were out of sync. And that the political certainly was the precipitator and the earliest efforts to make profound change. That said, I think it's also true that President Gorbachev understood that you were going to have to have a very profound economic restructuring as well. I think it always has to be remembered that his purpose, I think is, his strategic goal was never to eliminate the Communist system. His purpose was to make it work, to modernize it, to bring it into the new era of new technologies, new economic realities. But he started with politics, I think, perhaps logically and sensibly, because he had to build the support for economic change.

Now he did get much further along in the political realm. There's no question. And I must say that when I arrived in Moscow in late 1990, we were really at the beginning of the serious efforts to make economic change work, and to approach the question of how you were going to restructure the economy. And it was essentially at that point that he met the strongest reaction, I would say, he had witnessed up to that point to what he was trying to do. And I remember very well, I can't remember whether it was just before or just after I arrived, a new prime minister was brought in, Mr. Pavlov. And he was seen basically across the board as

someone who was put there or was the man essentially responding to the hard-liners and the conservatives in the party, who were really dead set against any decentralization of the economy.

And that, I think, was the turning point, in a way, in the momentum for change and so forth, and it never really picked up again. Gorbachev was always fighting a rear-guard action against these hard-liners who did not want to see a true economic revolution and a decentralization of the economy which would have cost them their basic control over the whole system.

So I think the question of what came first and what came second may not be as relevant as how hard it was going to be to undercut the real core of what made Communist power work, which was the control over daily life, and the things that required the economy to work from a centralized, controlled system. And once you began to undermine that, you were truly undermining the whole system. And these guys knew it, and they were resisting it, and I would submit, in essence, that was where the coup came from in '91.

Hanna Notte
Ambassador, you just mentioned the resistance that Gorbachev faced at the time, which is a perfect segue to my next question. So, I imagine with everything that was going on in Russia in the 1990s, the political and economic changes underway, there would have been very different, initially Soviet, and then Russian interests, bureaucracies, actors, institutions, with different priorities. In short, Russia was not a monolithic actor. How did the United States try to ensure that it properly understood, let's say, the lay of the land in Russia at the time? Then, how did that understanding translate into U.S. policymaking on relevant issues?

Ambassador Collins
Well, I think the simple answer to that is that in the time I was there, which is the late '90s until 2001, the reality was that the Russian public increasingly had a much greater role in the definition of what was possible or what the options were the political leaders saw, or economic leaders, than had ever been the case before. In the Soviet period, when the Soviet Union was really working, the American embassy's approach to finding out what was going on was the art of Kremlinology: essentially trying to figure out what was going on inside the halls of power in the Kremlin. You read the newspapers and the press, you listened to the media, and you talked to the few people that were available, but fundamentally what you were trying to do was figure out what the men who were really making the key decisions were up to. What were they thinking, how were they doing it?

Then that was this whole art of trying to make something out of very little sketchy information, and very limited sources, and an art of building a picture from very little information. When the Gorbachev era reached its zenith, and in a sense, the '90s began, what happened was a total turnaround in the problem for the embassy or for anyone trying to figure out what was going on in Russia. Because suddenly everybody thought they had a voice, even if it was a limited one, and everybody was willing to talk to us. So the problem became not so much making a full picture out of a few little puzzle pieces, as it was figuring out which pieces

were actually part of the puzzle you were trying to solve. The amount in sheer volume of information was overwhelming in many ways.

So how did we deal with this? The embassy, first of all, had a policy that we would talk to anyone. That is, we were not limiting ourselves to talk to any particular group or set of political leaders or party or excluding anybody because in some sense it was pretty clear to us as the '90s emerged, everyone had a voice. Everyone's voice was in some sense relevant, so we talked to everyone wherever we could. There were almost no exclusions, with a few really nasty, objectionable characters.

The second was, it was geographically important to get out beyond Moscow much more than we had ever done before. In the Soviet era, of course, it was difficult to travel; the government, central government, wanted to contain you as much as possible. Now we could travel pretty much anywhere, go anywhere, talk to anyone. So I set up in the embassy, along with the support of the ambassador, a program that I called Circuit Riders, where I had my officers in various positions, particularly the junior officers, simply go out and travel as often as possible. Each of them, to the extent I could do it, were given a few regions, or in the Soviet era one of the republics, to get to know, to understand the leaders, to get to know what the citizens were about, what was happening in those regions. How was it different? What did they think of what was going on in Moscow and so on and so forth?

In other words, to try to create a picture for us, as best we could, of what was happening across the country and not just in the capital. And I think we were pretty successful at it, frankly. We cultivated relationships across the entire country. And we were very successful, I think, in establishing ourselves in Washington, if you will, as the man on the ground, the people who had the connections. We could give some sense of what reality looked like, not just in one city, but all across the country, which is, I think, quite an accomplishment. Thirdly, we continued to pay a great deal of attention to the vast amount and quantity of information that was available in media, or newspapers, the electronic media and so on. Remember, we were in an era here before computers, even before cell phones. I didn't get a cell phone of any kind until the very end of my time in 1993. So, I mean, this is a time in which I would say we expanded our reach very greatly, and we knew it was very important to talk to a wide range of people.

Now, then you had to sift this out, and that meant figuring out what was important for American interests. What we were trying to do, what was relevant to our policies and programs. Also, what was relevant and most important from the standpoint of the Russians we were talking to. Where did those coincide, where they differ? How did we have the same perceptions? How did we have different perceptions? Were we pursuing the same objectives or different objectives? I think the embassy did a good job in this because we were the one U.S government entity on the ground. We increasingly had people in all aspects of Russian economic and political life talking to people or engaged in programs with them. Therefore, we were at least, in a sense, a source of ground truth for much that the American government was trying to do or sought to achieve.

So I think the simple answer is, we just talked to a lot more people. We had to develop the capacity, which I think we did well, of deciding what was important and what wasn't. Mind you, that was not something that made the embassy always work in sync with the media, or with other elements who had a singular agenda, or, you know, people who had differing views. The visiting firemen who would come in from Washington, make two or three stops and go home, left with an impression. It was a snapshot at best, and it was very limited. So we always had to deal with those who said, "I was in Russia, and I know what is true." Well, that, first of all, became irrelevant probably six months later, but also was always very much more limited than our effort to save a constant, I would say universal sense, of what was happening across the country. And that was a big difference.

Hanna Notte
Thank you so much for that, Ambassador Collins. I want to come in right here on the firemen who would come over from Washington for brief visits to Russia, as you put it. Can you talk a little bit more about the process of U.S. foreign policymaking vis-à-vis Russia, and some of the constraints and opportunities that present themselves to the ambassador on the ground as Russia policy is taking shape in Washington? I remember that in the previous conversation with Jill, you recounted the hours after the August 1991 coup in Russia, when there was not yet any clear guidance from Washington as to how the U.S. should position itself. Then you at the embassy took the decision that really, unless the security and safety of American citizens was concerned, you would not engage in any way with those who led this coup. So I'd like to ask you, beyond such rare situations of crisis, when the embassy has to react and act really fast, what are some of these opportunities and constraints for the embassy vis-à-vis those in Washington?

Ambassador Collins
Well, I always said that particular decision is probably the only one I ever made alone in my career, and I think that's probably still true. But I would like to make a point here about policy. Policy is, in essence, if one is looking at the question of what is the sought-for outcome in a given decision made by the leadership in Washington, policy becomes a two- or three-part exercise. First of all, there is the information question. How do you come up with a realistic decision about direction, or about the answer to a question? Let's take for instance, are we going to cooperate with the Soviet Union, and then the Russian Federation, on space exploration? All right. We had had times in the past when we did so. I was there in the '70s when we did. And the issue was again on the table.

I mean, what kind of approach was the American space program going to take to the Soviet space program, then the Russian space program, in this new era? All right. So the first question was, well, you need to get the information you can. So we've talked a little bit about how do you gather information, how you do this? So the embassy was reporting; we had people who followed the space program. We had visits from people like the NASA director, Dan Golden, who met his counterparts and so forth. We had lots of different scientists and other specialists who had some experience or some familiarity with and visits to various space

programs. So information, I would say, was not in short supply, and pretty good information gathered in many, in most cases, by people who really knew what they were talking about. So the information base for the question was quite good.

The question of then, "All right, what do we, as Americans, do?" was a question of, what is our objective, what are our interests, and in formulating the kind of answer, "What do we think Russian interests are? And how can we basically come to the best decision if the decision is we're going to cooperate with them?" Well, the decision was ultimately we're going to cooperate with them. I think it wasn't made by the embassy. I mean, frankly, the ambassador's role in that was probably absolutely minimal. But the decision to do so was made by those who assessed both that it was in the U.S. interest, both broadly and even financially to cooperate with the Soviet then Russian space program. And secondly, that there was everything to be gained because we could both achieve an objective we were after, which was to enhance the exploration of space, in particular create a space station and use the technologies available to both to advantage in producing a joint outcome. Then there was the third dimension.

The third dimension was implementation. Policy doesn't mean a thing, frankly, unless it produces an implementable and then well implemented outcome. For that, I think the embassy played always a significant role in everything from the simple question, do you get people visas on time, to helping people who had to engage Russians at various times in different ways, and in different places; to understand the people they were dealing with, help them achieve the goal they were after, to achieve an outcome. And that, I think, was an ongoing process. That's the policy part of policy that doesn't end with the decision – or the definition of what most people think of as policy – that is, how do you make it real? And there an embassy, and an ambassador and so forth, have a great deal of influence for the most part, because they are the ones who can help hold together the effort of, usually, people coming from the United States to work with their counterparts. They can help them solve problems, human problems, problems that arise in arguments, et cetera, because we have people on the ground there.

The American embassy's main strength, I think, in something like that is understanding the culture and the way in which the host institutions work, and their people, and understand how to explain to Americans how to achieve what you're trying to get done with those people. That is where I would think diplomats, and embassies, and the art of diplomacy, if you will, from all people comes into its real strength. And I would say here only that this is not just foreign service officers; this was people who worked in the embassy on the space program, who were agricultural experts, and so on and so forth.

This was a broad community of people who came to know Russia well enough to guide the people who were coming to implement a very complex and complicated program in getting it done, learning how to work with their counterparts and, in a sense, building a new joint community that was able to produce the space station. And the first pieces of it were launched while I was there as DCM. So I think that's the key. That's what policy is about. It's –

gather the information, so you have the right base. The people in Washington are going to make the decisions, and maybe the ambassador will have a voice and maybe he won't. But then comes the embassy's strongest role, in many ways, and that's implementing on the ground the kinds of outcomes, the programs that are trying to achieve a certain goal. There, I think the embassy has no equal in its importance on a day-to-day basis in ensuring that things work out.

Hanna Notte
Thank you. This is extremely useful. If you allow me, I'll ask another follow-up question on that final bit, the implementation of policy on the ground. Were there ever any instances that you recall where different U.S. actors, whether it's the Treasury, USAID programs, or political capacity-building programs, were operating somewhat at cross purposes in Russia on the ground? And then, how did you try to navigate that at the embassy?

Ambassador Collins
I wouldn't say I ran into many cases where they were working at cross purposes, but one of the greatest problems, I think, an ambassador has is in coping with the reality that the flow of information and requirements and requests for action and so forth that come from Washington have one universally always true quality, and that is that everything is first priority. And so, you are constantly faced with the question of how do you, as ambassador and chief of mission, overseeing the work of your team... And I had, remember, 1,600 employees at the U.S. embassy and a budget totally, when I was ambassador, of about a billion dollars a year. And it was working on countless U.S. government programs. I think we had 24- 28 government agencies represented at the embassy.

Now, the question then was, were they always working in sync or setting the priorities that the ambassador set? And the answer was, not if you listen to Washington, because each of them said, "My job is first priority; your job is to go get this accomplished." The Department of Agriculture had its own priority, the Department of Defense had another, the NASA people had their priority. Perfectly understandable, but what we had to do, in a sense, was make it work at the embassy, and how I did that was not to ever try to stop the conflict of priorities, because you couldn't – and yes, there were different times when people were working, I won't say at cross purposes, but at different purposes or at different paces – but rather to set up an agenda that allowed everybody in the embassy to understand how they would contribute to the mission's objectives: our priorities.

And one of the things I had to do in that regard was to, I suppose, assert authority as ambassador and say, "Look, you all get orders from your home agency and your budgets come from them, but let me tell you, right now you work for me. As ambassador, the chief of mission, I have a president's letter here that says you're responsible to me. So, we're going to work together and we're going to figure out how we approach setting these priorities." So what I did, essentially, was sit down with the team and we had a kind of six-part agenda. The idea was then each agency was there to help me understand what they could contribute to fulfilling each part of the agenda.

So, one of them was support the political transformation to a more democratic government. Second was to transform the economic structure to a market economy. Third was to advance the U.S. economic interests and trade. Fourth was to do what we needed to do on the security side, carry out the security interest. But what I said to all of them was, "All right, each of you can contribute, or perhaps maybe not, to all of these objectives. I want to know what you're going to do to support the public diplomacy objective."

And I told my consular people, for instance, that nothing is more important than having a decent image in the Russian public mind about American visa policy and how we treat people. So don't tell me there isn't a public diplomacy dimension to the consular section; there is. Similarly, my defense people had to explain to me, or I had to make it clear to them, that I knew the money they were spending in Russia to accomplish their goals had an economic impact and the advancement of American economic interest, and the way in which Russian economy was developing.

So there was an effort here to help each of the agency representatives understand how they contributed to what we were trying to achieve as the mission. And those sets of goals were set pretty much by, I would say, the U.S. government, State Department, the president, and so forth. Now, I don't know whether that answers your question, but it was the way that I tried to approach the problem of everything from Washington, having its own uncoordinated set of priorities for the most part, come and hit the embassy as though they didn't have anything to do in Moscow except carry out the Department of Homeland Security's latest crusade. Well, you couldn't run an embassy that way, and I think we were quite successful in the way we did it. People were quite satisfied with the outcomes, and I think we did a good job.

Hanna Notte
It very much answers my question, thank you so much. And if I may, I'll ask you one more thing about the role of the embassy on the ground, because you, a few moments ago mentioned this notion of reporting ground truths from Russia back to the United States. Could you share a story or an anecdote from when the advice of the embassy on the ground was not really heeded in Washington, either because it went against the prevailing conventional wisdom in Washington on an issue, or because it conflicted with intelligence assessments that prevailed in Washington, and how you navigated that?

Ambassador Collins
Well, I think it's fair to say that the American embassy's view rarely was the only view that was going to prevail, but I'll give you two examples. When the financial collapse took place in 1998, I set up the embassy to do, as a priority, a daily report on what we were seeing in Russia, as widely as we could report it, about the reaction to this, the impact of this and so on and so forth. We had one instance in which the media reported some particular incident about a run on a bank, and the fact was, it was what I used to call the atypical truth. Yes, there was the... this run on this one bank, but did it represent the collapse of the Russian banking system? Well, no, it didn't.

And so, I think it was a fair point that what we reported back was a broader picture that had its impact in the way people saw what was happening in the economy. A lot of the economic reporting that Washington depended on in the sense of traditional economic understanding – data, figures of bank deposits, interest rates – first of all just didn't reflect the economy necessarily in a true or a sensible light, because there was a huge amount of barter going on. People made their way economically and to survival in ways that didn't have much to do with money, in many ways.

So the picture, I would say, was better given by us, in some ways, because we were about the only ones who understood that or who wanted to report that. And I think we had an impact there. Not always, people would ignore us at times, they wouldn't pay attention at times, but it was important that we did it. I think the most frustrating case of a specific incident – maybe you read this in something or not – had to do with the famous Y2K period.

Hanna Notte
Yes, yes.

Ambassador Collins
This was the period of transition of the computer dates, or dates used on computers, from the 1900s to the 2000s, and the fear or great concern in the technology world and the world of those who watched, what might happen if you had a breakdown in technology of the computers, which were relatively new to the world, when you changed from 19s to 2000s. Now, there was all kinds of worst-case thinking going on in the United States, including that in the Soviet Union, and Russia, really, at this point, the change was not being prepared, and they were not doing enough to prepare adequate safeguards. So, there were all sorts of wild theories about how, if things went wrong and the computers went crazy as a result of the date change, they might accidentally launch strategic missiles. Or more to the point, that the power grid would collapse or things like that, and you would have chaos in the streets and a total breakdown of the whole system of order.

Well, they finally gave up, fairly early on, the idea that we would launch missiles from Russia; that wasn't going to happen. But the power grid question had a life of its own. And apparently there was a study done at the order of the intelligence community that concluded that this was something with a significant degree of possibility, if not probability. And so, the embassy was getting wind of this, and the practical question was, what were we going to do about the safety of Americans and American property if there were a collapse of law and order because of the date?

Well, the information I was able to obtain – I went and saw a man named Anatoly Chubais. Anatoly Chubais at that time was a senior official, and I gave him the problem, and he said, "Look, you don't need to worry. Russian Federation has precisely two power stations that rely on computers to control their power generation and distribution. Rest of it is just analog, you know, the men are there twisting the dials and flipping the switches, so it's not going to

happen." I reported this back from a very authoritative source, and it was clearly ignored completely, because what I got, not too much later, was an order that I had to prepare for a power collapse. And secondly, that I had to allow anyone at the embassy who wished to leave to take voluntary leave over the holiday period when all of this was going to happen, and essentially ensure their safety if they weren't comfortable being there.

Well, I mean, of course, I spent the time of New Year's Eve with friends from the embassy. We went down to Red Square, but we already knew six hours ahead of this that nothing was going to happen because in Vladivostok all the lights were on, and everybody was having a grand old time for New Year's. And by the time it came to Moscow, we went down to Red Square, all the lights were on, and everybody was having a grand old time. So it was one of those cases where, I'm afraid, ground truth was disregarded.

It was interesting because I asked then later for an assessment of what had happened; wasn't this an intelligence failure? And I never heard anything. But the reality was, this was the kind of situation where embassies could be very frustrated: when they are ignored, when they know the information in Washington is not accurate. But I won't say that's the norm. I mean, I think that it happens from time to time, and a professional embassy knows how to manage it and take a deep breath and move on to the next question.

Hanna Notte
Thank you so much for sharing this story, Ambassador Collins. We've talked a lot about politics, and we've talked about the economy. I would like to talk about culture a little bit. If I understand correctly, it was actually Russian music that was the spark that generated your interest in learning the Russian language at a relatively young age. There was a particular man, Dr. Herbert Zipper, who was a music director and a conductor in Chicago, and at one point he got you and your brother involved in Mussorgsky's opera Boris Godunov. He asked you to play the church bells, which obviously occupy a very important place in Russian music, and then you decided to learn the Russian language. So, I'd like to ask you, could you reflect a little bit on how your appreciation for Russian culture, art, music, literature, has helped you as an ambassador, as a diplomat? Can you reflect on the importance of understanding culture and related notions to foster empathy and understanding when it comes to conducting diplomacy?

Ambassador Collins
Well, I would simply start with one short phrase and that is that culture is context. Any diplomat serving abroad lives in a context that is not the American context; it is a different one. And that context, in many ways, I suppose, is best defined as culture, or culture plays perhaps the overwhelmingly important role in the way in which you can understand your environment and your context. So Russia, for instance, in this case, there are all sorts of reasons you would begin to get pieces of understanding of Russian context from everything from its literature, from its history, from its music, from its arts, from its village life, et cetera.

And I think the point of this is that a diplomat's job is to represent effectively the interests and the policies and the objectives of his government, in my case of Washington's government. And the critical question before any ambassador, or anyone, really, in any position at the embassy, is how do I get something done here in this cultural context, in this context? How do I talk to people? When people tell me something about efficiency, for instance, what do they mean? Do they have the same understanding of the word as we do? When you come to the question of security, what is the understanding historically, after the invasions from East and West over centuries and so on, of Russians about security? Is it the same as an American understands it, where we live in a culture 200 years old plus, and have never been invaded by anybody?

So, I guess my first basic starting point is culture is absolutely essential if you're going to be an effective interlocutor with your host culture, and you're going to be effective in trying to achieve the agenda or the objectives that your government wants you to achieve in the place to which you're assigned. I think culture in that sense is absolutely vital. If you don't understand the host culture, it is going to be very difficult for you to connect effectively, to identify your opportunities for when things are shared interests, or interests in common, or understood the same. Find ways to address issues where you do not understand things in the same way but come to a central point where maybe you can reach that objective of understanding.

Being able to explain to your own government, that is to Washington, what is possible and what isn't at this time, with this group of people. And how can you achieve maybe a part of what you want? All of those things are, in one way or another, enhanced to the degree... are resolvable, in a way, to the degree that you understand and can make a part of your approach putting yourself in the other guy's shoes, as the phrase goes. Understanding the culture he's coming from, and therefore what he's really telling you when you talk to him.

So I think in that sense, I don't think culture can be overestimated as vital, but it's not just arts and literature and so forth. I mean, it is the context, the socioeconomic, political, environmental context, within which your hosts are living, and how they make their decisions. And then what that means for your objectives in trying to get a decision from them. And I can assure you, it's very important.

I would just say a word about efficiency, for instance. It was always my sense that Americans have a very simplistic idea about efficiency in economic terms. It's kind of, if you can produce two widgets, three cents cheaper by taking a decision to fire one employee, that makes sense because you're making more money, you're being more efficient. In the Russian case, I was never sure that was the case. They seemed to think that, well maybe you had to start with an equal measure of thinking that keeping everybody in a job was important, and everybody had to work. And maybe it wasn't just a matter of whether it was less economically beneficial if you did that. But efficiency might have had a different meaning.

So, that kind of thing was a very important matter to have in mind. And most Americans who come, who don't have the experience of anything like understanding the culture there in Russia, simply don't understand. They assume Russians see it the way we do.

Hanna Notte
Thank you for that, Ambassador. This learning about Russia, about its culture, but also the socioeconomic context, history, you've done it over the span of a lifetime. You went there as a student, you then served there in the 1970s, then, of course, again in the 1990s and as ambassador in the late 1990s. And then subsequently also through think tank activities, Track 2 activities you've been engaged with Russia. You've also experienced very different parts of the Washington bureaucracy from the inside, of course, at State in Washington, at embassies abroad. I believe you did a stint at the NSC. You worked with Capitol Hill; you had exposure to the intelligence community.

And I'd like to ask you, given this wealth of experience, what are your main takeaways from engaging with Russia, with Russians, from such different vantage points? And did any of these periods come with specific opportunities or constraints, or afford you specific learning opportunities about how to best engage with Russia?

Ambassador Collins
Well, certainly when I worked as an official representative of the U.S. government in whatever capacity that was, I had a rather specific context within which I worked. When I was a student, we were a really odd group of people there. There were 18 of us in the whole Soviet Union, and we were seen as pretty odd characters. Tremendous interest in us, tremendous amount of curiosity, because the Soviet Union at that time worked. I mean, there really was very little information that came in from the outside that wasn't filtered, and so a living, breathing American was a pretty odd thing to have around. But it certainly gave me a sense of reality about the generation that was my generation, Gorbachev's generation and so forth, their school, what these students, who were the elite – these were the best educated people they had – how they were thinking, what they knew and so forth, and it was very revealing.

I mean, I learned a great deal. I mean that there was a lot that in some ways they kind of shared with us, but there was a tremendous difference in the whole upbringing and approach to their careers and their professions and what they knew that was very intriguing to me. For instance, I could never quite get over the idea that I, as an American, knew all about kinds of things, I mean, I'd grown up on a farm, I knew about farm machinery. I knew about electricity. I knew about finance, and so on. I would talk to Russian students, counterparts, and I would be talking about one of these things, and they would say, "Well, when did you study that?" It was almost like if you knew something, you had to have studied it, you didn't grow up with anything sort of innate. Now, that obviously wasn't true for them, they all knew how to get on in their own culture and so forth.

But the idea that you would know about electricity, for instance, which was a big deal for me at the university, because I became the one who could keep the lights on when they would blow the circuit breakers. It was really quite extraordinary. So, I learned something there. I learned a lot about the way the students thought and how they viewed the... And of course, very little of it had much to do with the portrayal in the media of the Soviet Union, either by the Soviets themselves, who were putting out the propaganda, or our side that was writing about it as being the exact opposite. It was really much less dramatic. And the same was true in the embassy. When I was there, you learned all kinds of different things from working with people. But I think what I learned, perhaps, that is most significant, I took away lessons that I think are valid all the way through all of my experience, were two or three important things. One, that Russia has its own culture, history, interests, values, and so forth.

And they are not Americans. They are different from America. Their experience is different. Their geography is different. They face different issues. They have different aspirations in many ways. And that one has to start with the premise that you respect that. You have to listen to people about that, because if you don't, you're simply trying to impose on them a framework for the future of relations with either an individual or a culture that simply isn't going to work. You're trying to see them as just us in different clothing, and that's not true. It's just not correct. Second thing I think I took away from my experience was that we have many things that we share with the Russian people, with Russian citizens, even the Russian government, in terms of objectives or the way we see the world or interests. But we also have areas in which we see things very differently, don't approach things in the same way and have different interests.

And the question about how we as Americans or as individuals see those differences is very important. And I'm afraid that all too often in the United States, Americans tend to want to see anything that Russians have as an interest, if it doesn't coincide with our view, as illegitimate, or as not valid. Well, I won't argue one way or another about that, but that's a religious question. I mean, the real issue here is it exists as a difference, and one is going to have to manage it, and deal with it, and probably not be successful if the idea is that we have to make them change, or we try to ignore it. So put another way, accepting that Russians have legitimate interests, and that there are often views that they may hold that we do not, is simply part of reality. And it doesn't do us much good to try to deny these or to refuse to accept that there are legitimate reasons for people to see things differently.

And the third thing, I think, is how do you achieve outcomes that are desirable in dealing with that society? My experience is that you are not going to get very far if your approach is to define an outcome that is not accepted by them, and then try to impose it on them one way or another, whether it's through the famous tool today, a sack of sanctions on the economy, or trying to punish people or whatever. I mean, I have to say as an American that were the Russians or the Chinese to try to do that to us, we wouldn't succumb. We wouldn't give up our interests or our values. And why we think that others will do so has always been a bit of a mystery to me. And so, the idea that you can, in some cases, achieve a goal by compelling the

other guy to see it our way or to do it our way, whether he likes it or not, has, I think, proved itself pretty ineffective and hardly ever successful.

Everybody throws up on sanctions the idea of what happened in South Africa. The problem with that model from this point of view is that the global community almost unanimously agreed that they were going to isolate and sanction South Africa if they did not deal with apartheid. We don't have that kind of arrangement vis-à-vis the other kinds of sanctions we've tried. It didn't work with Cuba. It, I think, doesn't really work with Russia if the idea is that we want to force them to change their policies and so forth. And the third thing, I think, that's very important in all this is that it also is no way to deny Russia's legitimate interests.

I happen to think, after many years, that one of the critical issues we have not dealt with effectively is how to accommodate – or maybe accommodate isn't the right word – but how to cast our own objectives in terms of security, in the broad sense of the word, in a way that recognizes similar interests on the Russian side that may be seen as very different and pursued in very different ways. Because they sense a different idea about what security means, what it takes to assure it. And I think that's where we have come up into some very difficult times with their whole arrangement, or their whole view, about their near neighbors. We have, simply, different views. And in some ways, the question is not whether one is right or wrong; it is simply the fact that we have different views about this and have not done a good job in finding a way to accommodate them.

I think you have to understand what Russia's interests are. You have to understand how they view things. You have to understand where it's possible to define common objectives and goals and pursue those. And above all, you have to keep engaged. You have to continue talking to one another. If you don't, you simply run the risk of losing all ability to understand what the other fellow is about. So, either you are pursuing, in a realistic way, common objectives and goals and standing by your values, but pursuing them in a way that is potentially going to give you positive results, or you end up trying to impose a worldview on others that simply is not going to work. And it hasn't worked, really, for us pretty much anywhere.

Hanna Notte
Thank you for that, Ambassador. There's a lot there. And this notion of compelling the other side to behave as we, America, want, whether that's through sanctions or other means, it's something I'll come back to in a later question. But for the moment I'd like to ask you something else. You talked a little bit about your time spent in the Soviet Union. And at this point, the country, of course, was still remarkably isolated from the outside world. With Glasnost, it became much easier for Americans to build relationships with Russians, with institutions and with citizens – really unthinkable for an earlier era.

And then, of course, you had the arrival of the digital world in Russia. You already talked a little bit about this, the internet, and then, later, the advent of social media. So it really meant that there would be an abundance of information available to Russians from the outside world.

So we could say that today Russia is a much more open society and not divorced from the information space in which we navigate. Yet it seems to me that this greater connection and proximity, if you wish, both virtual as well as real, has not really fueled greater understanding on the core issues that divide Russians and Americans to this day. Would you agree with that? And then, if yes, how would you explain that?

Ambassador Collins
Well, I think it's fair to say that simply removing the barriers to communication, which has certainly happened – I mean, we share a universal global information space now, travel is possible if you forget the COVID period and so forth, but basic travel is open, et cetera – has removed the artificiality of the vision that each country had of the other for much of the 20th century. Now, it's kind of perverse that in some ways, in the Soviet case, from my experience there as a student and in the '70s and then dealing with it in other ways, the image that the Russian or Soviet citizens tended to have of the United States was absolutely amazingly positive. It was kind of, "This is the country where the streets were paved with gold and where everything was possible, and life was better."

I mean, everything was better over there essentially. Now, I can't swear that that was the view most people had... everybody had, because I didn't get to travel much and you couldn't do very much, but in my experience, that was the case. Now, it didn't mean they necessarily liked a lot of the policies of the government of the United States, or that they didn't think we were doing bad things, but that had nothing to do with their image of the society. The society was at the same time wholly unknown to them, except through the filter that the Soviet Communist Party propaganda machine presented them. And they didn't believe that. The one thing that was truly revelatory, I think, when I got to Moscow the first time as a student, was the degree to which nobody believed the propaganda. I mean, nobody believed the stuff that you read. What they read in the newspapers, however, was very important to them because it told them what they were supposed to think. And that was important for survival and making sure you didn't step wrong or whatever, but did it reflect what they really thought? No.

So, when we had things going on like the Voice of America's jazz program. Now, the Voice of America's jazz program was a phenomenon there. I mean, it almost created Soviet jazz – who learned instruments, who learned to play, and so on just from the jazz program on VOA. And that was a huge deal, I mean that you could get that kind of information. So, put quite simply, the Soviet isolation of its... the Communist Party's isolation of its population created, in a sense, an opposite effect. Everybody thought it's got to be better out there than it is here, because it's not so great here. Now, I'm not talking about the Party leaders and so on, but I mean the average person. I think what happened then, when all of those barriers were taken away, to begin with, everybody wanted to go see those streets of gold or to understand how everybody was perfect over there, where things were wonderful, and they found out, well, no, not always. That this is another society that's got problems. They've got poor people. They've got crime, or, you know, a lot of the things that they've been telling us are the greatest things about America aren't always true.

In other words, a sense of reality has set in over the last couple of decades about the nature of American society and Americans and so forth based on experience rather than an artificially structured view that it has got to be better over there than it is here, but never having any experience of it. And I think the same is true on the American side. Our effort on our side to assume that all Soviet citizens were out to destroy the United States and so on and so on, were atheistic communists and so on, was totally unreal. And Americans, too, came to understand that it was more complicated than that. It was a lot different than that. There were all kinds of people who held very noble views, et cetera, et cetera. So I think familiarity, I would say, you know, there's the old idea that familiarity breeds contempt.

Well, not necessarily. It breeds complexity in view. It breeds reality of understanding about the other side's way of life, et cetera. That it's neither 100% heaven, nor is it 100% hell. And I think the reality is that's the world we now live in because there are very few Russians who think it's all great in America or Americans who think it is all horrible in Russia, if they know anything about it. But that doesn't mean we don't still have our differences and understand that. So, I think the problem we have is that each of us formed an idea when the Soviet Union came to an end and the Cold War ended about the future, and the future of the relationship between us. And in some ways, that, as I think we've mentioned before, was based on the idea about what was the real outcome of the Cold War. And put quite simply, from the American's point of view, we won.

And therefore, the model that we should be pursuing was the one when we won the last war we won. We haven't won one since 1945, but we did then. And when that happened, Japan and Germany sort of said, "Okay, we lost, we get it. We're changing the way we were structured and how we lived, and we're going to be good democracies and good global citizens." The problem was that the Russian side didn't see it that way at all. They didn't see they lost. They saw that they got a way to get rid of the Soviet Communist system, changed their society, as we said, got rid of the empire, but they expected to be a part of the decision-making process about the future. And we didn't, you know, they just didn't agree that the Americans won and we're going to set the terms, and it took time for the bloom to go off that rose pretty significantly, to the point where, I think, when Mr. Putin came to his second presidency, he had already concluded that it was not going to be possible to work with the idea of integrating Russia into the Western Euro-Atlantic model. That it was going to have to go its own way, and that's what he's been doing since 2012.

And it's not pretty, I think it's tragic, but I think, you know, there have been moments when we lost opportunities possibly to have shaped the development in different ways. I'm not naive that it could have been all roses, but the reality is: neither of us ever resolved this issue of how the American and Russian role in this broader Euro-Atlantic community is going to work. And the United States and Russia both have not done very well at getting over the outcome of the Cold War, which is seen in very different ways.

Hanna Notte
Thank you for that, Ambassador. You just evoked this notion, this American notion of, "We won the Cold War." Now, George H. W. Bush avoided evoking that notion. I believe you have characterized U.S. foreign policy under George H. W. Bush in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union as a policy of restraint and strategic patience. The U.S. did not try to force events at the time, make things move faster than they did. And I think you believe that the U.S. could have ended up contributing to some serious problems in Russia at the time had it acted otherwise.

And now, this brings me to a slightly broader, conceptual question here about foreign policy and diplomacy. There will be moments when it is necessary to act decisively, fast, take the initiative, engage in resolute action. And then there will be moments when patience, restraint, letting things play out is simply the wiser course of action. Could you reflect on examples for these two different courses of action, or I should say action versus inaction, in the context of the U.S.-Russia relationship? And perhaps even give some guidance to future diplomats regarding how you learn to develop a good intuition for when you should act and when you should be patient and wait?

Ambassador Collins
Well, let me say, I think maybe the question is better... maybe recast slightly in the way I would approach it. And that is, how do you deal with the facts as differences arise? And it's clear your objectives are running up against opposition, or the interests of the two parties involved are simply at odds in a way that does not present any special outcome that you can divine at the time. And first of all, context is very important. It is simply a fact that the United States and Russia cannot go to war. We will destroy each other and the rest of the world, probably, if we do. And so that is just not an option. So that's kind of off the table, and therefore, everything that we do has to be constructed to address our differences and our issues or our joint objectives in that context.

And it has been the case, since the end of World War II, that that's true. So, we have a context, and therefore there's always going to be an element of restraint inherent because you cannot risk war in the sense that any rational person would ever do so. But setting that then as the framework that I just gave as a given, the question is how do you manage opportunities or challenges? But I think the first thing that's very important is that it is a constantly important factor to understand what the interests of the other side are. How do they see them? How do they define them? And so forth. It doesn't mean we agree with them, but we have to understand what they are. I think we also have to have two other dimensions of our understanding of interests. One, which interests are such that we would call them red lines? These are not interests that are, I would say, negotiable in the sense that they are seen by the other side, and same with us, as not crossable lines.

Warfare, going to war, is one, obviously, but there are some others about security and so forth that change from time to time and get... And the third is that the other side's interests are legitimate because that's how they define them. We may not agree with them, we may not

think they are something we will accept, but they are interests and many of them are legitimate. And therefore, simply denying them is going to be a problem. So, if you start with that premise, then, it seems to me, you always begin with the question of, "Okay, what do we have in common? Is this an area... If we're faced with an issue, does this issue contain area elements in which we see things the same, or could easily define things in the same way?" And if so, you try to identify those, and you work to build from them. Where else can you defer things? Are there things that are not all that important to have done at a particular moment?

Can you buy time with... in not having to deal with those? Are there elements that are subject to compromise? Yes, we have interest. Yes, they have interest. Can we find something where nobody gets 100%, but everybody has enough to leave? I mean, this is the essence of getting to deal with issues in a way that don't become almost politicized to the point where you can't deal with them right away, but you have to approach them in that way, and the problem we have in many ways today is that nobody's trying to do that on either side. We are, rather, trying to demonstrate that we're not giving in to the other fellow, that we're not giving in to any erosion of values we have set out or whatever we want to say.

And so, everything becomes political almost right from the beginning, and discussing any issue on its own merits has become more and more difficult. So you have to depoliticize it and begin, to the extent you can, to define your issues and deal with them on their merits rather than as linked to something else or as a test of your capacity to defend yourself in your values. That's one thing, I think, that's very important.

The second thing, I think, that's important is that you have to understand things have a time. Issues mature, things come in a time of context. Leaders in both countries either face elections, in our country, face change of regimes in Russia. Timing matters, and understanding that you have to approach issues when they are mature or when you have come to the point where, in a sense, the door opens to discuss them.

And we don't always do that either. I mean, my best example of that, where I think we missed a huge opportunity with the Russian Federation, was right after 9/11 and after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Mr. Putin came here, and he essentially put on the table the opportunity to cooperate against the terrorist activity, and he also, in Texas, signed a series of documents which, in essence, committed Russia to pursuing further economic reform, political reform, integration with European institutions and so on and so forth. And he went home, and I think he had, in his mind, taken substantial political risk in putting all this on the table from the standpoint of his position within the Russian Federation.

Unfortunately, the George Bush administration simply didn't pick up that opportunity, from my point of view. They didn't explore what might have been possible, they didn't use the openings to see what could have been achieved in the many different ways in which we might have approached the Putin government at that time. Instead, they focused on very different priorities and within six months, as I recall, they withdrew from the ABM Treaty, which

completely undercut Mr. Putin's entire idea that he could demonstrate the ability to cooperate with the Americans on strategic issues, that they were being taken seriously as a partner and so forth. And I think we paid a big price for that.

It did reflect what I heard when I came back to the United States in 2001, in July, from talks with Mr. Cheney and Mr. Rumsfeld as I did my outbriefings. They simply indicated that they were not terribly interested in the Russian relationship as a critical element of our future going forward. They had other objectives, saw other dangers and other priorities, and that was, I'm afraid, reflected in the fact that we simply ignored the opportunities that Putin might have put on the table, had they been developed or explored, and we just didn't take advantage of it.

Hanna Notte
Thank you for that, Ambassador Collins. This lack of interest on the part of Rumsfeld and Cheney to use this opportunity with Russia that you just mentioned, I want to come in on that. It appears that already as the Cold War ended and the other superpower threat simply seemed to evaporate, the main problem on the U.S. side – whether it's government or academia or think tank – really became to find someone who still cared to look at Russia.

And I'd like to ask you, do you think this is an inevitable side effect of having a grand strategy, overarching organizing principles that structure foreign policy? I mean, it seems to me that we go from the Cold War as the overarching frame to the post-9/11 global war on terror, to great power competition with Russia and China today. And do you think these kinds of organizing principles are a useful way to focus American intent and strategy, or would you say that the resulting reduced bandwidth to pay attention to other, seemingly lesser issues, comes at too great a cost for America overall?

Ambassador Collins
Well, I have my own view about where we are and how we have brought ourselves to our current situation. I do think that during the Cold War, we were thinking in very 20th-century terms. We had not yet come to the digital revolution, we had not yet come to accept this idea of massive globalization and so forth. I mean, if you think about it, the cell phone is a new phenomenon in the mid-1990s. The computer is not really available and used widely until the late 1990s. So, the digital world and the globalized world is something new, and it comes upon us at the same time that the organizing principle for all of our international priorities, in many ways, was the rivalry with the Soviet Union and the ideology of Communism. I mean, it was partly religious war, and it was partly great power war.

Now, the problem is, when the Soviet Union collapsed, all that ended, of course. It ended, really, before the Soviet Union collapsed in many ways – I agree with Ambassador Matlock that the Cold War was over in a negotiated end sort of in 1989 or so – but the organizing principle for our definition of our place in the world essentially ceased to exist. So I'd say the same was true for Moscow, for the leadership in Moscow. And Moscow in the 1990s had a traumatic decade, that was over my time, trying to redefine itself, trying to make itself anew into a society and a state with borders it had never had before, in a context that was totally

different, with new neighbors. In short, it was totally disoriented. And to boot, that was just the international dimension. The domestic dimension was even more so because all of the value system, all of the legal system, all of the economic system, everything that you organized your life to accommodate or to take advantage of for four generations, disappeared.

Now, culturally, many things stayed the same, I understand that, but you woke up on January 1st, 1992, and suddenly private property was a good thing. It had been almost illegal the day before, et cetera. So, the profundity of the change that was going on in Russian society was tremendous and almost unimaginable to Americans. That was the nineties. That was the time of total transition in... Maybe I'm overstating, but fundamental transition in the political, economic, social, international security structures and so forth, system that Russians in Moscow had to live with and use as governing.

In the United States, on the contrary, for the decade of the '90s, I would say, we had a holiday. We basically took ourselves as having won. Yes, the terrorists brought home some problems to us, we're going to build to them, but in the '90s, that hadn't hit yet. And so we were, I would say, quite confident that our idea had prevailed. We were number one, nobody was our equal, and we were dispositive in most respects when it came to the international order. And in Europe, in the Euro-Atlantic world, our model was the one that was being pursued, the NATO system and so on and so on.

Okay. Come to 2001, and suddenly things begin to change. And I am simply going to make the case that the terrorist attack on New York and all that followed that, the financial collapse in the third quarter of the 2000s, that essentially began our 1990s. Our system ceased to be so infallible. Nobody thought we could be attacked. You know, we had defeated the last people who tried that and turned them into a different society. Our economic system let down millions of Americans, and the American ideal of, if you will, the Reagan era's picture of how America works best, was suddenly open for question.

And so, we begin our 1990s, from my point of view, in the 2000s. A decade later, we are equally disoriented, and then in the 2010s, we suddenly find out that we're not the only superpower anymore. I mean, the Russians are still a nuclear superpower, but suddenly you've got China. Now that has left us, by the time we come to the end of the 2010s, in a position where the United States hasn't really come to any real decision about how we fit in the world anymore.

We started our international role, if you will, in the 1890s, and for the 20th century, America, frankly, never had a challenger that was our equal. We were dispositive in the non-Communist world. We had the money. If you go back and look at the amount of global trade we controlled at the end of World War II, it was absolutely astronomical. I mean, we were setting the agenda, people were following us. And then in the Cold War, because we were the power that could, if you will, stand up and prevent the Soviet Union from asserting its authority, everybody else was sort of falling into line, and this thing called the Third World was kind of not relevant. You know, we did proxy wars and other things, but I mean, it was not a big deal.

Suddenly, starting in 2001, all of that is beginning to crumble. The Americans no longer are the only economic power, and we cannot be dispositive in the economy globally. We are no longer the only global player that can claim superpower status. Yes, we have the best military in the world, but if you look at it, we haven't won a war since World War II.

So, what is our role? And I would submit that today, the biggest problem we have is that we don't know. It's not a matter of a grand strategy. It's a matter of understanding what is an effective role for the United States now in the global context to protect our interests, work with people who think like us to enrich and enhance our lives and safety and deal with those who are competitors and are adversaries when we do not have an obvious overwhelming superiority in economic terms, in technological terms and in any number of other ways. And that is a huge challenge for Americans, and we haven't even developed the vocabulary to begin to talk about it that way.

If you listen to Congress or you listen to the way people talk about our role in the world, it's as though we're still in charge, and that is, frankly, not the case. The Russian side understood it in the 1990s and Mr. Putin came to power with the agenda of restoring Russia's position as a global power. Not the only one, but a global power. The American problem is defining its position as a global power and giving up the idea that we're the only one that matters. And we have got some serious work to do in that regard.

So grand strategy, well, I'm not so sure it's grand strategy that's the problem. It is having a realistic and fully capable capacity to understand our strengths and weaknesses, our limits and our possibilities, and our role in the global system as one of the great powers, maybe the most economically wealthy, maybe militarily powerful, but not to the point where we alone can shape any agenda. And that is our real challenge now. And it's the one that Mr. Biden is grappling with, and I think future presidents after him are going to be grappling with for some time.

Hanna Notte
Wow, what a comprehensive answer and, I think, perfect way to end this fascinating conversation today. It's been so enriching and interesting. We have covered a lot of ground in our conversation, and I believe that future generations of scholars and of diplomats who take an interest in Russia and the former Soviet Union will really benefit greatly from this account and treasure it, so I want to thank you so much for joining us today.

Ambassador Collins
Well, it's been my pleasure, Hanna, to be part of this, and I look forward, actually, to seeing others' comments and to maybe even having a look at my own.

Hanna Notte
Thank you.